

The greatest social change often blooms from personal acts of love...

Yellow Crocus

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Flaming Chalice Press

For Kalin, Maya, and Rinda. And all the Matties
in the world—past, present, and future.

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Prologue

Mattie was never truly mine. That knowledge must have filled me as quickly and surely as the milk from her breasts. Although my family “owned” her, although she occupied the center of my universe, her deepest affections lay elsewhere. So along with the comfort of her came the fear that I would lose her some day. This is our story. You will wonder if it is true; I can assure you it is, though my parents wish it were otherwise. This is as true a story as has ever been told: the story of my love for Mattie, and, I suppose, her love for me in return.

Chapter 1

APRIL 14, 1837

Mattie lay curled around the warm shape of her son when the unwanted messenger knocked. She stayed on her pallet, reluctant to end this precious time, and listened to the sound of quiet snores coming from Poppy, her grandfather. She gazed at her young son, pressed her nose close against his soft neck to take in his sweet baby scent. She gently wiped the glistening sweat away from his damp forehead and gave him a tender kiss upon his temple. Another intrusive knock struck the door. Mattie got up.

Cradling Samuel so close that she could feel warm puffs against her breast, Mattie shuffled across the packed dirt floor to the door. Though she expected this visitor, had anticipated a knock for weeks, she had dreaded this moment. Once she opened the door, her life would forever be divided into before and after.

Mattie slowly pulled the rough plank door open and saw a lithe silhouette in the moonlight. There stood Emily, a girl with pale, hazel eyes and skin the color of tea with milk. Mattie had seen her before but did not know her well. She appeared to be no more than twelve. In contrast, twenty-year-old Mattie's skin was dark as roasted coffee beans. Her jet-black hair, twisted into two tight braids that framed each side of her narrow face, was covered by a dingy white cloth wound tightly round her head. Her strong arms were scratched from tobacco. Dark eyes, big and round as caramel candy, took in all the comings and goings of the people around her.

Without introduction the skinny girl at the door mumbled, "You got to come now. The baby gonna be here soon." With her news delivered, she turned back to the Big House.

Mattie called after her, "I gotta pass Samuel over to my poppy."

"Be quick about it. They expectin' you."

As Mattie crossed to his pallet, Poppy sat up to receive his great-grandson. Tears pushed hard against the back of Mattie's eyes. She kissed

Samuel tenderly on his round cheek. "I love you," she quietly poured into her son's tiny ear and pressed her lips for a final time against his bald head. Her lips pulled tight inside her teeth, she carefully passed Samuel into Poppy's outstretched arms.

"Remember, Rebecca gonna feed him when he get hungry," she pressed out, though her grandfather was well aware of the plan.

She stared into Poppy's eyes and hoped he understood all that she did not say. She wanted to be assured that her son would be well cared for, that he would be told she had not chosen to leave him, and that when she returned he would know that she was his mother. But Mattie said nothing. She did not scream in protest or plead for more time for her son to grow older. Instead she turned away in silence, blinking back tears as she left her home and abandoned her son. She had no choice. She had to be strong, get through this separation, and return to Samuel as soon as possible. Whether that would be in months or years, she had no way of knowing.



Mattie shivered as she followed the dim light cast by Emily's oil lamp. They walked toward the Big House, a direction she had learned to dread and which she rarely traveled.

"How long she been havin' pains?" Mattie asked as they passed the small brick cook house.

"Most of the day, I think. She start screaming after dinner."

Mattie asked, "Her water show yet?"

"Don' know," the girl replied as they reached the rear of the building.

They entered through the painted door and climbed up the worn back stairs to the second floor. Mattie stepped carefully behind Emily along a soft, colorful rug. Going down the smooth white hallway past several polished doors, Emily stopped in front of the last door on the left.

"They waitin' in there for you," Emily informed Mattie, pointing at the door. Mattie watched the girl's mouth open wide in a yawn. Then Emily turned and made her way down the corridor.

Mattie's heart beat fiercely as she stood alone and uncertain in the long hallway. Suddenly the white door flew open. She jumped back in time to avoid being trampled by a figure rushing out. Warm air tinged with the

smell of sweat wafted out of the room. Hesitating at the threshold, Mattie peered into the dim chamber.

A petite white woman with skin the color of heavy cream lay in a large bed. Eyes closed to the world, she moaned loudly. Her damp, dark hair stuck to her sweaty, swollen face. The woman's face contorted as she cried out in pain. Her eyes squeezed so tight that her lashes were buried tight, and her mouth was pulled so hard that her lips were hidden in the cave of her mouth.

"There you are," proclaimed one of the two women hovering around the bed. The large white woman with narrow blue eyes and gray hair pulled into a severe bun pointed to a chair in the corner of the room. "We are not yet in need of you. Complications..." She trailed off without a complete explanation. "Go, sit in the chair, and do not do anything to upset your mistress."

Mattie moved into the room as quietly as possible and made herself small to avoid drawing the attention of the large, red-faced man looming over the foot of the bed. She lowered herself into a plush velvet armchair and unconsciously rubbed the smooth pile with the tips of her brown fingers. Her eyes flew around the room, taking it in. An intricately carved four-poster bed took up most of the room. Next to it sat a marble-topped washbasin covered with crumpled cloths. The man directed the two women poised on either side of the bed.

"Hold her down when I am ready to pull the infant out," he commanded. "Prevent all movement or they both may die."

The doctor pulled dirty metal forceps out of his bag and wiped them quickly with a blood-stained cloth. Then he bent over the bed.

"Now," he commanded.

The women pressed their pale hands against the patient's shoulders and arms, pushing her hard into the mattress. Mattie winced in sympathy and sucked in her breath as the doctor thrust the forceps deep into her thin body. "Ahh, aahh, ahhh," screamed the woman. The doctor tugged hard on the metal handles, but there was no movement.

Repositioning himself with his legs braced wide apart, the doctor pulled again. His hand slipped off the end of the instrument, leaving it protruding from the woman's body. He muttered to himself and rubbed his sweaty hands on his pants, then repositioned himself and firmly grabbed the forceps once again. Heaving on the forceps, the doctor's hands slowly slid

backwards; the instrument moved along with his thick fingers. Sandwiched tightly between the triangle of the forceps, Mattie saw bulges of purplish scalp emerge between the mistress's thin, white legs.

The doctor grunted. His left hand lost its grip again. "He is stubborn!"

Resuming his quest to remove the infant, the doctor grabbed the forceps. Pulling again just as the woman's uterus was contracting, the infant's head emerged until Mattie could see the tips of ears. The contraction ended. When the doctor pulled again there was no movement. The next pull came along with a contraction, and this time the rest of the head, shoulders, torso, and limbs rushed out. A purple, motionless infant flopped onto the bed.

The doctor stared at the limp child. Mattie fought the urge to grab the infant, turn it over, and rub hard. Helplessly she waited for the doctor to do something.

"Do it," Mattie silently encouraged the baby that was ruining her life, "take a breath."

The doctor tied off and then cut the still pulsing cord as the infant lay motionless. The infant suddenly jerked, then tipped back its damp head, opened its blue mouth, and let out a raspy wail. Mattie gave a silent cheer, *You did it, little one!*

"Good thing I was here for the delivery," Doctor Jameson declared. "This one needed modern medicine to take her first breath."

"A girl!?" asked the new mother.

"Yes," confirmed the doctor matter-of-factly.

The young woman craned her neck to see and reached out her arms for her daughter. The doctor carelessly bundled the infant in a receiving blanket and started to pass her to the woman in the bed.

"Not now," said the large woman with the bun. "You are too weak to hold the girl. Give her to the nurse," she directed the doctor.

The mother collapsed against the bed in resignation. With a shrug of his shoulders, the doctor carried the damp bundle to Mattie. Handing the newborn over, he asked, "Is your milk in?"

"Yes, sir. My son, he born some months ago," replied Mattie, looking down at the oak floor.

"Then do what you came here to do," replied the doctor. He turned back to the bed to receive the afterbirth and stitch up his patient's tears.

Mattie looked down at the nameless pink baby. The forceps had left blue and purple bruises around the baby's ears. The infant was already licking

her lips and bobbing her head in search of food. Drawing up her shirt, Mattie exposed a full breast with a large nipple ready for an infant's mouth. Mattie took her breast in hand and gently tickled the tiny lips with the raised nub until the baby opened her mouth wide. Then Mattie swiftly pulled the eager mouth over her breast. The baby sucked vigorously until Mattie felt the familiar tug as her milk flowed. She settled back on the soft, cushioned chair, holding the baby girl against her heart. Gazing at this new life, Mattie thought about her beautiful son, asleep on a hard pallet in another world only two hundred steps away.



Before the newborn finished suckling, the big white woman with the tight bun interrupted, "You will call the baby Miss Elizabeth. I am Mrs. Gray, the housekeeper. Follow me."

Mattie gently removed Miss Elizabeth from her breast and re-arranged her own clothing. Using her finger as a pacifier to soothe the newborn, she followed with the sticky baby in her arms.

Mrs. Gray led the pair along the dimly lit hall to a large room at the back of the house. A green couch and beige chairs were arranged around a fireplace on the right side of the room. Straight ahead, a bed and a rocking chair nestled close to a long window. The housekeeper did not stop here, but crossed left to another door that led to a small, windowless chamber. A low bed, covered with a faded quilt, occupied most of the room, and a small cupboard took up what little space remained. On the far wall was another door.

Standing in the doorway between the two rooms, Mrs. Gray lectured, "The large room is Miss Elizabeth's. You will sleep in here. The rear door leads to the servant hallway and stairs. You are to take the front staircase only when you are accompanying Miss Elizabeth. When she is not with you, you will use the rear staircase. There are two sets of clothes for your use—two dresses and two nightgowns—in this wardrobe." Mrs. Gray pointed as Mattie struggled to follow her directions. "You will place one day gown and one nightgown in the chute each Monday morning—that is the day after the Sabbath. You may not have your clothes laundered more than once a week. You will not be needing that head rag any longer, so that will be thrown out. Emily, the second-floor maid, will bring you meals three

times a day. If you have any questions, you may ask Emily; she is fully aware of the routines of the household. You will be told when Miss Elizabeth is to be taken outside her room.”

Mrs. Gray stared at Mattie. “Becoming a house slave is a rare privilege. I trust you will not abuse it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Mattie.

“Warm wash water is on the stand by Miss Elizabeth’s dresser,” Mrs. Gray instructed as they returned to Miss Elizabeth’s room. “Bathe her before the water is chilled.”

After Mrs. Gray left, Mattie looked at the infant cradled in her arms and remarked, “Look like it just us, little girl. Don’ know what I gonna do with you, suppose we gonna figure it out together. First we look round your room then we gonna wash you up.”

Mattie walked Miss Elizabeth around the room and took in her new surroundings. Long strips of dark green material hung on poles suspended across the wall a few inches below the ceiling. After crossing to touch the smooth silk, Mattie realized it covered something. Parting the drapes, she saw two long windows. Mattie had seen glass, knew the word for it, but had never touched it. She rubbed her rough fingertips up and down the cold, smooth surface. Gazing out, her breath caught at the sight of the slave quarters lit by the rays of the early morning sun.

Disoriented, viewing her home from above, she puzzled out which dwelling belonged to which family. When she found her own cabin, the fifth in the row with log benches in back, her heart leapt. She searched for Samuel and Poppy. But they were not in sight. Staring out the window, yearning for a glimpse of them, her eyes welled up with tears and her heart tightened.

Miss Elizabeth’s mewling brought Mattie’s attention back to the baby. She gave the infant her finger and then looked around again. To the left of the windows, a narrow bed in a rich cherry wood was covered with a newly made, tightly stitched patchwork quilt. The bright fabrics formed a flying geese pattern set to take flight out the window. She sat upon the bed, marveling at its comfort and the feel of smooth fabric.

“You got yourself a fine place to sleep, baby girl, not that you gonna be usin’ it anytime soon.”

To the right of the window, in the corner, a brightly polished rocking chair waited. A matching chest of drawers with a quilted pad on top stood

next to it. She laid the baby on top, next to the wash bowl with warm water. Opening each drawer, Mattie found finely stitched baby gowns, socks, diapers, and bonnets rolled in tight packages like eggs waiting to hatch. Looking down at the infant, Mattie remarked with a shake of her head, "You already got more clothes than the field hands all put together."

Mattie selected a set of smooth cotton clothes and laid them on the bed. She carefully unwrapped the floppy infant and dipped the girl in the shallow bowl of lukewarm water. Miss Elizabeth cried in protest as Mattie rubbed away white vernix and red blood, the last vestiges of the womb.

"Hush, hush. You gonna be all right. It not so bad," Mattie assured Miss Elizabeth. "We all done now. The worst of it over."

Mattie quickly tied a soft flannel diaper on the baby. She tugged a crisp white gown over her downy-topped head, being careful to avoid the bruised and tender areas of Elizabeth's face, then Mattie pulled the baby's thin, mottled arms through the gown's puffy sleeves. After being swaddled tight in a flannel blanket, the newborn relaxed and stared intently up at Mattie.

"See, you all right now," Mattie murmured to the infant. "You all clean." Despite exhaustion and sorrow, Mattie was curious about this place. "We gonna see about the rest of your room now. What this over here?" Mattie wondered out loud as she walked to the furniture near the fireplace and perched upon the green velvet davenport. She explored the movements of the springs by bouncing up and down. Next she shifted to each chair in turn and attempted to bounce on them, but they were hard and did not move.

Leaving a swaddled Miss Elizabeth nestled at the back of the davenport, Mattie knelt down to examine the intricate tile work on the hearth and around the façade of the fireplace. It was cold like the windows, but filled with rich colors in shades of green and gold. Tracing the swirling colors with her finger she stood up and was startled at the sight of movement in front of her.

"Hello!" she called out.

There was no reply. She leaned forward to get a better view of the scene. A woman came toward her. Mattie jumped back in surprise. The woman retreated as she did. Cautiously she raised a hand to the glass. It felt cool and smooth. She peered in closely then turned to examine the room, then turned back again. The room spread in front of her and behind her. This was like looking in water. Standing in front of the mirror, she tilted her head left

and right, opened her mouth, poked out her tongue, and studied her own reflection.

She looked carefully at her own round eyes, seeing them clearly for the first time. As a child, she'd been told they were like her mother's. In this reflection, she now saw that was true. She reached up to touch her face, watching her own hand explore her cheeks, lips, and nose. Mattie searched for Samuel's features in her own. The nose, she decided. She and Samuel shared a nose. And maybe the ears.

"Little girl, this place sure is somethin' ," Mattie spoke out loud, shaking her head as she retrieved Miss Elizabeth from the couch.

Mattie turned a full circle, following the wandering flowers along the wallpaper until she was looking at the rocking chair once again. Mattie pulled the rocking chair close to the window, sat with Miss Elizabeth in her arms, and looked out over the slave quarters. Occasionally she glanced at the door to confirm no one was watching her. She stared and rocked, rocked and stared, as if desire alone could will her spirit across the divide.

Eventually Poppy came out of their cabin with Samuel in his arms. Leaning close to the window, Mattie searched her son's face for any signs of distress. Poppy turned away from the Big House and headed toward Rebecca's for Samuel's morning feeding. Samuel's little head poked above Poppy's shoulder, his placid face bobbing in rhythm with Poppy's gait. Mattie stared hard as her son got smaller and smaller until he faded out of sight altogether like a leaf floating down a river.

Washed over with yearning and loss, Mattie could not bear to watch her world any longer. She sought out the soft bed in her strange room. She placed the baby in the middle of the mattress and then she lay down and wept. Burrowing her head in her arms, her tears flowed and flowed, like a hot summer storm, down her cheeks into the fluffy feather pillow. She ached for her son with such a force that it was difficult to breathe.

When her sobs subsided she raised her head to look at the stranger sleeping next to her. Tiny blue veins showed beneath translucent, pale skin in Miss Elizabeth's eyelids. The fragile and dependent baby lay unaware of the world around her. Mattie touched tiny eyes, nose, lips; her hand trailed across the infant's soft chin, her small, vulnerable neck. A wave of hatred washed over Mattie. She shuddered with repulsion.

Mattie laid her hand across the tiny mouth and pressed down until it covered two small nostrils as well. Her heart pounded fiercely behind her

ribcage. In a few minutes this could be over. The infant squirmed, her lips parted, and a loud, sudden cry escaped from the small body. Mattie jerked her hand away.

“I trapped here, but I ain’t so desperate, little one,” Mattie whispered fiercely, “I ain’t gonna hurt you, little miss,” reassuring herself, not the oblivious child.

Mattie collapsed on her back. Exhausted, she longed to sleep, to escape into her dreams, but as she lay flat on her back, her mind filled with images. She pictured Samuel screaming in Rebecca’s arms, his back arched in utter protest. She wondered if Rebecca would remember to swaddle him just right, with his arm bent up, if he cried hard. She replaced the image of screaming Samuel with an image of him utterly satisfied on Rebecca’s breast. That was not much better.

She rose and went back to the window. She pressed her ear hard against the glass, listening for sounds of her son. Nothing. She only heard the loud swoosh of her own pulse.

“Rebecca know how to take care of a baby,” she whispered out loud. “She real good and she love Samuel. Rebecca and Poppy gonna take good care of him.”

Mattie prayed out loud, “Dear God, it me, Mattie. I know it mornin’ and I mostly only talk to you at night, but today I need extra help. Please watch over my Samuel. Make him happy to get food from Rebecca, but not so happy he forget about me. Help me to treat this here little baby good. And make her not need me for so long so I can get back to my family. Thank you for listenin’ to me extra. Amen.”

Mattie lay back down in bed and turned her back to the infant. She willed herself to sleep. When she awoke a few hours later, she found herself curled around Miss Elizabeth, like a mother cat encircling her kittens.

Chapter 2

Two days later, the housekeeper intruded into the large bedroom just as Mattie settled in the rocking chair to nurse Miss Elizabeth. Mattie rose like a soldier coming to attention.

“Your mistress is recovered enough to see her daughter,” Mrs. Gray declared. “Bring the infant to Madam’s chambers at two o’clock.”

“Yes, ma’am,” responded Mattie. “Excuse me, ma’am. I don’t know what you mean by two.”

Mrs. Gray sighed and shook her head in disbelief. “That is a time,” she declared sharply, rolling her eyes. “Have you not noticed the chime from the clock in the parlor?”

Matte replied, “Yes, ma’am, I hear the sound it make every so often.”

“Every fifteen minutes there is a short song. Each hour it strikes according to the time. Can you count?”

Mattie nodded, working to hide her confusion, and replied, “Yes, ma’am. Up to ten.”

“Well, you shall have to learn more, or at least come to understand the partitions of an hour. You will be given a time to do your tasks and know when to do them by the clock.”

Mrs. Gray explained the workings of time to the woman who had previously lived by the movements of the sun. Mattie did her best to follow Mrs. Gray’s complicated instructions. She understood that she needed to count each time the clock struck. The number of strikes would be the hour.

“So,” Mrs. Gray went on, “when the clock strikes two times, it is two o’clock and time for you to return to the room where Miss Elizabeth was born. Do not sit unless you are invited to. Remember to answer ‘ma’am’ each time you are spoken to.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And do not exhaust her,” Mrs. Gray insisted. “She is still recovering from the ordeal of childbirth.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



Mrs. Ann, bobbing in a sea of pillows and fabric, eagerly waited to meet her daughter. Open draperies let in the warm sunlight and made the room bright. The marble bedside table supported a bouquet of bright flowers. Whirls marked the marble top: white and black swirling in an intricate dance, pushing close, mixing in some places, staying unique in others.

Smiling down at a small pillow, Mrs. Ann held it like an infant, rocking it back and forth. In her mind she practiced a greeting, “*Hello. I am your mother. You are my daughter, Elizabeth.*” At the sound of a knock, she hastily set down the pillow and once again smoothed down her covers.

“You may enter,” Mrs. Ann called out. “Good day, Mattie,” the young mother added, her hungry eyes intent on the bundle in Mattie’s arms.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” Mattie spoke deferentially from the doorway.

Every time someone called her ma’am, Ann Wainwright felt a fraud. Nearly a year after her wedding, she was still adjusting to the fact that she was married and living on a Tidewater plantation hours away from her real home. And now she was a mother and did not quite know what was expected of her. Conceiving on her honeymoon had pleased both her husband and her mother-in-law. That the child was a daughter was a disappointment they expected her to remedy soon enough.

As Mrs. Jonathan Wainwright, she presided as the mistress of the house, at least in theory. But she was hardly involved in the running of Fair Oaks: Mrs. Gray handled day-to-day matters, and her mother-in-law, Grandmother Wainwright, was loath to relinquish her role as hostess of Fair Oaks. Mrs. Ann had few opportunities to socialize either as a host or as a guest, since she was in confinement almost immediately after arriving at Fair Oaks. She had yet to make the necessary social connections that were essential for her establishing herself in this place.

Mrs. Ann beckoned Mattie over with a wave of her hands. The young mother studied her daughter in Mattie’s arms.

“She is not so beautiful, is she?” Mrs. Ann stated matter-of-factly.

“She young yet,” replied Mattie.

"I suppose," Mrs. Ann responded. "I have never seen one so young before. Is everything going as it should?"

"Yes, ma'am. She strong. She a good baby."

"Let me hold her."

Mattie carefully placed Miss Elizabeth into Mrs. Ann's eager arms.

"She is quite light. I imagined her heavier. Are they normally so red?"

"I don't know, ma'am. This the first white baby I ever seen."

"You have experience with babies?" Mrs. Ann inquired.

"Yes, ma'am. I been at births. I always take care of the babies around; I watched the young ones while their folks worked the tobacco when I little." Suddenly self-conscious to be saying so much, Mattie stopped speaking.

"Mrs. Gray chose well when she selected you."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Mrs. Ann asked, "You have a son? Am I correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. He three months."

"A son. How nice for you."

Having run out of questions and answers, an uncomfortable silence filled the space between the two women. They stared at the baby held in an awkward embrace. After a few minutes Miss Elizabeth started squirming. Mrs. Ann jiggled her daughter up and down, then held the girl close against her breast. The infant turned her head toward her mother, opening her mouth wide, bobbing her face into her mother's breast. Startled, Mrs. Ann jerked her baby away.

Alarmed, she inquired, "What is the matter with her?"

"She turning her head for food. She hungry, ma'am," replied Mattie.

"I suppose so. Well, I cannot be of any help to her. Here, you give her what she needs," Mrs. Ann directed as she handed her daughter over to Mattie.

Mattie took the infant but continued to stand next to the bed, uncertainty written on her face. The infant turned her head into Mattie's body. Mattie slipped her pinky into the infant's eager mouth. Mrs. Ann watched Mattie sway from side to side, comforting the infant but making no move to suckle her.

After a long, strange silence, Mrs. Ann spoke, "You may sit in the chair. I wish to see you do it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Settling into the chair where she first held and nourished Miss Elizabeth, Mattie gave the baby her breast. After Miss Elizabeth suckled for a while, Mrs. Ann spoke again.

“Yes, that is unseemly.”

Chapter 3

All the residents of Fair Oaks honored the Sunday Sabbath, though the house slaves did not forgo their duty to keep their owners fed and comfortable. After gathering in the drawing room to listen to a reading from the Bible, the house slaves prepared for the Sabbath dinner while the Wainwright family worshipped with the Episcopalian congregation in Charles City. For most of the year, with the exception of harvest, the field slaves were given a day of rest from sunset on Saturday until sunrise on Monday.

One Sunday afternoon, just past Miss Elizabeth's three-month mark, Mrs. Gray and Skinny Emily interrupted the quiet of the nursery. Mrs. Gray, a fixture at Fair Oaks for nearly thirty years, had moved east from her modest home in western Virginia three weeks before her twenty-eighth birthday. As a newly widowed woman with no prospects for another marriage, she had found herself in need of a position that would grant her status in society as well as a residence. Her role as housekeeper on this grand estate gave her both. She prided herself on running the household well. Though her family had owned no slaves, she quickly developed the necessary skills to deal with them fairly and effectively. Bringing in a field hand to feed Miss Elizabeth had seemed unwise to Mrs. Gray, but there had been little choice after the wet nurse they had rented died suddenly of a high fever.

Mrs. Gray spoke crisply from the doorway, "Miss Elizabeth is old enough to be away from you for a few hours. As you are fortunate enough to live near your family, you may visit with them on Sunday afternoons beginning today. Instruct Emily on how to care for Miss Elizabeth when you are away."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am," Mattie responded, hiding her excitement from the housekeeper.

“You must return by supper, though you may be called in earlier,” Mrs. Gray commanded before she left the room.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mattie’s heart raced. She was anxious to touch and caress her dear son. She yearned to hold him, feed him, and be his mother for a time. Each day she spent hours staring out the nursery window tracking her people. Once or twice a day over the last months she had briefly seen Samuel coming and going. She watched as his cheeks grew fatter and bits of black fuzz formed on his head. She searched for hints of his personality, studying the way he moved his head or looked around. Of course he never saw her. He was nearly twice the age he’d been when she left him. Mattie feared that he did not remember her at all.

Though Mattie longed to rush out to the Quarters, she attended to Miss Elizabeth’s needs first. Settling into the rocker to nurse, Mattie unbuttoned her dress. Miss Elizabeth arched her back, flapped her arms, and squealed in excitement and anticipation when she saw Mattie’s movements. Nestling against Mattie’s breast, Miss Elizabeth drew out sustenance from her nurse. The baby’s deep blue eyes gazed intently into Mattie’s caramel irises as her pink fingers patted and stroked Mattie’s soft brown skin. Miss Elizabeth grinned up at Mattie, causing milk to dribble out the sides of her mouth.

“Silly girl,” Mattie admonished the baby, tickling and teasing her. “You gotta pick: eatin’ or smilin’?”

Turning her attention to Skinny Emily, Mattie gave directions for the infant’s care. “She don’ like to be in a wet diaper so get her a dry one right away. If she fussy, sometimes she satisfied with my finger. She like to be walked round the room, lookin’ out the window and lookin’ at herself in the mirror.”

Clearly irritated, Skinny Emily replied, “I cared for babies before. How much trouble can she be?”

“She no trouble,” declared Mattie. “She a good baby.”

“She a baby. A baby just a baby. They all alike,” said Emily.

After Miss Elizabeth had her fill, Mattie brought the child up to her shoulder and slowly rubbed the girl’s back. Years of experience had taught Mattie that there was no rushing a baby. It only took longer if you tried to make it go quick. Rocking the baby, looking like patience itself despite her yearning to be with Samuel, a soft song rose from Mattie.

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby
Your momma's gone away and your daddy's gone to stay
Didn't leave nobody but the baby*

A soft belch escaped from Miss Elizabeth's tiny mouth.

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby
Everybody's gone in the cotton and the corn
Didn't leave nobody but the baby*

Miss Elizabeth grew heavy, melting against Mattie's body.

*You're a sweet little baby
You're a sweet little baby
Honey in the rock and the sugar don't stop
Gonna bring a bottle to the baby*

Mattie moved Miss Elizabeth down into her arms and cradled her close, rocking back and forth.

*Don't you weep pretty baby
Don't you weep pretty baby
She's long gone with the red shoes on
Gonna meet another lovin baby*

The little one's eyes glazed over, her eyelids slowly blinked shut and then open, shut and then open, then shut.

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby
You and me and the devil makes three
Don't need no other lovin baby*

Mattie continued the gentle song, rocking slowly, confident of lulling Miss Elizabeth to sleep.

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby
Come and lay your bones on the alabaster stones
And be my ever lovin baby*

Miss Elizabeth lay with her silky soft head against Mattie's strong, warm arm. Her open pink mouth glistened with saliva and breast milk; heavy, limp arms flung back at her sides. Mattie gently wiped away the pooled milk in the corners of Miss Elizabeth's mouth before deftly transferring her to the bed they shared in Mattie's small anteroom. Miss Elizabeth tipped her head back to protest. Bending over the baby, Mattie rested her hand on the girl's back to settle her back into a deep sleep and waited patiently until she heard the sound of rhythmic breathing. After a last pat, Mattie turned away to go to her family.



An unbroken string of Mattie's ancestors going back to her great-great-grandparents had lived at Fair Oaks since its founding in 1690. The plantation, which sat on the northern bank of the James River, was part of the Virginia Company's westward expansion. As was customary, land grants were given in proportion to the number of people a grantee imported to tame the land. Commander Theodore Pryne had the funds to bring thirty Europeans and Africans as indentured servants, so he was given fifteen hundred acres to plant. All indentured servants, both European and African, agreed to work off their debt for seven to fifteen years. After that they were to be released and given five acres of land, a bushel of seed, and the freedom to pursue their own fortunes in the New World.

Quickly the landed gentry realized that their plantations would not be profitable if they paid their workforce. Thus Mattie's African ancestors were not turned free or given the means to farm for themselves but held in perpetual bondage after the Virginia Assembly passed a law in 1705 clarifying once and for all the status of Africans in the colony. It declared "all servants imported and brought into the Country...who were not

Christians in their native Country...shall be accounted and be slaves. All Negro, mulatto, and Indian slaves within this dominion...shall be held to be real estate.” In addition, social status for slaves would be transferred from mother to children rather than from father to child. Those changes in social codes ensured eighteenth-century planters of Virginia a steady supply of workers.

Family lore held that Mattie’s paternal great-great-grandfather would have been free had the assembly waited but two months to pass this law: his indenture was to be completed later in 1705. As it was, none of her ancestors had secured their freedom from the peculiar institution known as slavery. Naturally they all imagined living as one of the free Africans in Charles City County, Virginia, with varying degrees of envy and rage.



Mattie hurried down the muddy footpath to her family’s cabin. Though it had been her home for her entire life until three months ago, she was nervous. She had never been away from the Quarters before. Would she be accepted back after being “brought in”? She did not know anyone who had moved to the Big House.

Anxious and excited, Mattie arrived at the unfinished plank door and took a deep breath before pushing it open and crying out “Hello.” There was no response. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness, and she saw that no one was there. She sighed. She went back out to look for her son and Poppy, starting with Rebecca’s cabin.

Rebecca was a strong, substantial woman who was always on the move. She and her husband, Lawrence, took pride in their cabin and their three children, all kept as clean and tidy as possible. Always ready to offer an opinion—asked for or not—Rebecca had volunteered to feed Samuel as soon as word came that Mattie was being brought in. Deeply grateful Rebecca had milk to spare for her son, Mattie had accepted readily.

Rebecca was born in a barn two counties away, on the land of a newly freed white indentured servant. He had purchased Rebecca’s mother, Millie, as his first step in becoming part of the owning class. But Millie and Rebecca did not live in the barn for long. The mistress of the farm soon realized that her husband had fathered Rebecca and insisted that the “whore and her bastard” be sold.

The large plantation they were sold to was Rebecca's home until she was eight. Born with her left leg wrapped around her neck, Rebecca was late to walk and did so with an obvious limp. This decreased her owner's ability to sell her individually, so she became part of a lot of ten slaves sold to fund a grand tour of Europe. Unfortunately Millie was not part of the sale. Fortunately Rebecca was assigned to Mattie's cabin, where she found a warm welcome in Mattie's family and became the big sister that four-year-old Mattie longed for.

Mattie knocked at the rough plank door. Rebecca swung it open and screamed at the sight of Mattie. Surprise and delight shone in her eyes. Pulling Mattie into her large arms, Rebecca held on tight. Sudden tears streamed from Mattie's eyes as she sank into Rebecca's warm embrace.

"There, there, girl. Let it all out. You home now. You okay," Rebecca murmured as Mattie sobbed into her chest.

Slowly her tears subsided until Mattie caught her breath and pulled away. She managed to squeak out, "Samuel here?" through her tight throat.

Rebecca pointed across the room. Samuel sat on Poppy's lap. Shaking, Mattie rushed across the room to scoop him up. She held her son tight against her heart, taking in his smell as she swayed and murmured endearments into his ear. Her salty tears dropped onto his half-bald head. Samuel arched his head back to look up at the woman holding him.

"I been tellin' him all about you so he gonna know you," Rebecca told Mattie. "We ain't gonna let him forget you or think you forgot him."

Mattie started to cry again. Poppy walked to her, kissed her cheek, and said, "Glad to see you, Mattie. Welcome home."

Word flew that Mattie was visiting, and folks stopped by to pay their regards, hear about life in the Big House, and to see what transformation may have been wrought over one of their own. Everyone gathered in the sticky July air on the four wooden benches that formed a square outside Rebecca's cabin.

Sarah, Rebecca's daughter, showed off a newfound skill. A round-faced, cheerful baby with an easy smile, she took great delight in crawling back and forth to the people who waited for her with open arms and proud smiles. Samuel, on the other hand, was young enough to be satisfied sitting with an adult. After a bit of resistance he accepted Mattie's lap, staring intently at the faces surrounding him.

Mattie was disappointed that her husband, Emmanuel, was not there to welcome her. This was his usual visiting time of month, but he had not come from Berkeley Plantation. Mattie and Emmanuel were not legally married, since property had no legal rights. But their respective overseers had been happy to have them declare their intention to form a family by jumping the broom since coupled slaves were less likely to run away and usually produced new workers.

Mattie described the Big House to the field hands, few of whom had ever been inside it. Though they were all familiar with, and somewhat afraid of, the exterior of the large white building visible through the hedges. The most dreaded ritual of the year occurred annually on the grounds in front of the imposing, columned façade of that building. On the first day of the new year all the workers, from the house and the quarters, gathered while Massa and the overseer called out the names of the people that had been sold or rented out for the year.

"It all bright white inside like the outside, with big stairs in the front of the house for the white folks and small stairs in the back for us to use. I don' see many people, just Emily, that skinny, high-yellow girl, Mrs. Ann, she Miss Elizabeth's mama, Mrs. Gray, she always tell me what I supposed to do, and, of course, Miss Elizabeth. She a pretty good baby. Don' get me wrong, she not so dear as my Samuel here," she said as she bounced him up and down on her knees, "but she a good eater and she don' cry much."

Mattie pointed. "See that window there? The one on the corner up highest from the ground? I think that Miss Elizabeth's room. I watch out of it when I get the chance."

"You see us?" Poppy asked.

"Mm hm. I see you carrying Samuel to Rebecca and coming in from the fields and such."

Poppy nodded his head. "Good to know where you at. I gonna stop and wave from now on. Just in case you there."

"I gonna be waving back. Even if you don' see me. Every mornin' and every evenin' I stand there watchin' you all. Samuel look like he pretty happy," Mattie ventured.

Rebecca jumped in. "Confused at first. But now he used to it. I sing to him. That helps."

"He sleeping all right?" Mattie wondered.

"He a real good sleeper," Poppy said. "Hardly ever get me up."

“Cook says Mrs. Ann gonna try at havin’ another one. That true?” Rebecca asked.

“That what I hear. They got her eatin’ meat at all her meals. Massa be wantin’ a son, just like most men folk.”

“Guess they gonna be keepin’ you busy for a while.”

Mattie sighed. “I wanna finish up with Miss Elizabeth, be done with the Big House, but I gonna be doin’ whatever Mrs. Gray tells me. I s’pose they gonna have me feed this next one. I hopin’ for a boy too. Maybe they send me back out if they done with the babies.”

“Bet you likin’ all the food and fancy clothes,” someone declared.

That got Mattie angry. With heat in her voice she replied, “The food good, the clothes nice, but I rather be out here with Samuel.”

At the sound of his name Samuel fussed and reached for Rebecca. Mattie’s heart skipped a beat because she suspected he was hungry. She wanted to be the one to feed him while she could, while she was here, but she was afraid he might refuse her. Samuel twisted hard away from her to get to Rebecca. Mattie looked at Rebecca, uncertain what to do, her unspoken question written on her face.

“Go ahead. You offer it to him. That all you can do,” Rebecca said gently. “Take him somewhere private. Where he ain’t gonna see me.”

Mattie carried Samuel inside the cabin. She lowered herself onto a hard pallet and slowly undid the top buttons of her dress and pulled the fabric aside. Then Mattie laid Samuel across her lap, tucked his right arm behind her waist and pulled him toward her left breast. He arched his back, jerked his head away, and scrunched up his face in preparation to let out a wail.

“You okay,” Mattie said gently, “I got the good stuff too. You used to love it right here.”

Samuel stopped protesting when Mattie spoke. She rubbed the back of his head and leaned over to kiss his forehead. “We got time.”

She gazed into his eyes, rocked back and forth, and sang to him:

Go to sleepy little baby

Go to sleepy little baby

Your momma’s gone away and your daddy’s gone to stay

Didn’t leave nobody but the baby

Eventually Samuel relaxed. Mattie cautiously, slowly brought his head toward her breast. He parted his lips a little. She squirted a bit of milk into his mouth. He licked his lips, smiled up at her, and opened his mouth. She gently placed her nipple into his waiting mouth. His body tensed, but he didn't pull back. She squeezed her breast to bring out more milk. Samuel licked her nipple. She did it again and he licked some more. They sat frozen, her breast against his mouth, with him neither pulling away nor latching on. Mattie held her breath and said a prayer, "Please God, give me this."

She inhaled slowly and calmly breathed out. Tenderly she rubbed the tight curls on his head. He pulled away, but she kept her hand behind his head. He pushed back against her flesh and bones as he attempted to pull away. She rubbed his hair again. He quickly turned his head slightly from left to right, opened his mouth wide, and then pulled her nipple deep into his mouth. Then he sucked with vigor. Her milk rushed out into him.

"That right, baby boy. That right. You know. You know what to do."

Mattie breathed a sigh of relief. She still had this. They hadn't taken her son away from her completely. Sitting on the edge of the pallet, Mattie was determined to enjoy this moment, this precious time with her son.

Chapter 4

Miss Elizabeth sat comfortably against Mattie's left hip as they came down the front stairs. When Mattie turned to enter the formal sitting room their bodies tensed in unison. Mattie gently patted Miss Elizabeth's leg as she privately whispered, "You all right" into the ten-month-old baby's small pink ear. "I ain't gonna leave you."

Mrs. Ann and Grandmother Wainwright sat in waiting for this Saturday afternoon ritual. Mrs. Ann perched uncomfortably at one end of the blue upholstered couch in the center of the large, high-ceilinged room, a brown muslin dress pulled taut across her large, round abdomen. Nodding absently at the words coming out of Grandmother Wainwright's mouth, Miss Ann gazed away from her mother-in-law.

Grandmother Wainwright, the widowed matriarch of the household, had married into the Wainwright family in 1800. She gave birth to a son, Alistair, in 1803, and then suffered through several pregnancies that ended in miscarriage. A daughter, Rose, arrived in 1808, followed by Jonathan in 1810. When Rose succumbed to scarlet fever in 1812, Grandmother Wainwright locked her husband out of her bedroom, declaring she no longer wished to risk another broken heart. When Alistair broke his neck at the age of thirty-one while attempting a risky jump on horseback, she saw it as further confirmation that it was best not to love too deeply or become too attached. It was a principle that had served her well since then.

Grandmother Wainwright fully occupied one end of the blue couch. Volumes of black fabric from her skirt covered the seat of the couch. Her pale eyes stayed fixed on Mrs. Ann's face as Mattie and Miss Elizabeth waited in the entryway of the room.

"Of course you shall not suckle this one either," she said. "I do not care if it is the fashion. It is unseemly for a woman of your stature to feed a child.

Elizabeth is to be weaned to goat's milk. As soon as my grandson is born, she can start with him."

Mrs. Ann continued to nod.

"Now bring the child over to visit her mother," Grandmother Wainwright commanded, finally acknowledging Mattie's presence.

As they crossed the room, Mattie felt Miss Elizabeth slip her hand across the neck of Mattie's dress. Pudgy pink fingers traveled along Mattie's collarbone until they grasped the shells of the necklace that nestled there. The toddler rested her head in the crook of Mattie's neck, hiding her face from the two women on the couch. Rubbing the child's back with her free arm, Mattie resisted the impulse to kiss the top of Miss Elizabeth's head or whisper words of comfort into the little girl's ear. When they reached the couch, the child tightened her grip on the shell necklace as Mattie pulled her away from her body. Tears filled Miss Elizabeth's bright blue eyes, and her bottom lip quivered as she clung to Mattie.

When Mrs. Ann spoke, resignation tinged her voice. "I am too big to hold her. Keep her on your lap for today."

Mattie hid her relief.

Grandmother Wainwright snapped, making no attempt to hide the contempt in her voice, "You spoil that child. She needs to know she is not in control."

"She will learn soon enough. I am too tired for tears today."

Mattie, careful not to make eye contact with either of the women, sat on the chair next to the divan. Miss Elizabeth kept her face hidden in the crook of Mattie's neck, though she tentatively peeked out at her mother. When Mrs. Ann tickled her leg Miss Elizabeth smiled at her mother. Slowly Mattie shifted Miss Elizabeth until the baby faced her mother.

"Patty-cake, patty-cake," Mrs. Ann began. She chanted the familiar rhyme and clapped her daughter's warm hands together. Moving both of their hands through the gestures, they both smiled when they got to the end. Miss Elizabeth turned around to make sure Mattie approved of the game as well. Mattie nodded and smiled reassuringly at the child.

Grandmother Wainwright interrupted the game. "As soon as my grandson is born, you will suckle him. We have purchased a new girl to be with Elizabeth."

"Yes, ma'am," Mattie replied.

“It will not be for a few weeks yet,” inserted Mrs. Ann, “...and it may not be a son.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Of course it shall be a son,” Grandmother Wainwright declared without hesitation.

Mattie was composed through the rest of the visit, but she was deeply shaken by this news. She had anticipated suckling the new baby, but she did not think it would force her away from Miss Elizabeth. As much as she had desired to keep her special feeling only for Samuel, she had come to love this child. This caring, little white girl had captured her heart. And she was going to lose her too.



The coming weeks felt like the days leading up to Miss Elizabeth’s birth when she waited to leave Samuel to come in. Each morning Mattie wondered if this would be their last day together. And then each night she thanked God for the gift of that day and asked for one more. It was an anxious, bittersweet time.

Mattie knew it would be an easier transition for Miss Elizabeth, and for herself, if they nursed less in preparation for the change, but she did not deny the child her breast. Whenever they settled in together for a feeding, Mattie had a heavy heart knowing this might be the last time she held Miss Elizabeth so close.

One late Sunday evening, Mattie was staring out the window of the nursery hoping to catch sight of Samuel. She had been standing there since she returned from her visit to the Quarters. For many hours on that lovely May afternoon Samuel had squealed in delight as Mattie ran after him. His tight-fisted hands pumped back and forth as she chased him then he would suddenly freeze, allowing himself to be caught in his mother’s arms and twirled around. After a few spins he used his limited vocabulary to ask for, “Mo, mo,” and she happily began the game all over again.

Miss Elizabeth sat near Mattie’s feet, occasionally pulling herself up on Mattie’s long skirt or crawling off to retrieve a ball Mattie pushed away with her foot. The door to the nursery opened as Mattie’s toe was about to strike the ball again. Quickly Mattie turned from the window, reached down

to Miss Elizabeth's outstretched arms, brought the child into her arms, and said, "Good evening, ma'am."

"Labor has begun," declared Mrs. Gray. "No need for you to come to the birthing room. When the child is born Emily will bring him to you and take Miss Elizabeth to her new room."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

With that, Miss Elizabeth and Mattie were left alone for the last time. Mattie sat on the rocking chair with the one-year-old on her lap. Her voice shook as she explained to the child, "You gotta be with that new Charlotte now. I gonna be with your new brother or sister. Charlotte was brung over to take care a you. She seem fine enough." Her voice caught. "You gonna be all right."

Mattie pulled Miss Elizabeth close for a cuddle, but the active girl wanted none of it. She pushed her body away and slid her legs down to the ground. The child quickly crawled to the ball by the window, adeptly transitioned to a sitting position, and threw the ball toward Mattie. It rolled past her. With a sad smile she lowered herself to the ground to retrieve the ball from behind the rocker. She turned around to see Miss Elizabeth gazing at her expectantly, eyebrows arched upward and head cocked sideways in a hopeful question, "Ba?"

Mattie blinked away her tears and said, "All right. We gonna do it your way." And she threw the ball back to the baby.

Hours later, while they were both dreaming, Emily brought a newborn bundle to Mattie's room and took Miss Elizabeth away from the warm bed the toddler had shared with Mattie since the night of her birth thirteen months before. Still groggy from sleep, Mattie did not realize the swap had been made until she was awakened by the click of the door closing behind Emily. "Wait," she wanted to yell, but she did not. She kept her words of protest to herself.

Outrage poured through her. She was not given even one last kiss. Hot, unshed tears stung her eyes. She refused to touch or even look at the new baby, knowing there was no point in caring about him. He lay there screaming, wanting to be suckled, but she ignored him.



Miss Elizabeth woke up in a strange room in a strange bed. Her heart raced in her chest as she looked around in panic. Where was her Mattie? She cried out, “Ma-ie, Ma-ie,” but Mattie did not come. Her cries got louder and more desperate, but still Mattie did not come. The not-Mattie walked with her. The not-Mattie offered her food. The not-Mattie shook her. Still Miss Elizabeth cried for her Mattie. She screamed until she slept.

When she awoke Mattie was still gone. In a small, anxious voice Miss Elizabeth pleaded, “Ma-ie?” The woman with her said something Miss Elizabeth did not understand. Miss Elizabeth waited. She comforted herself as best she could with her own thumb, rocked herself back and forth, and stared at the white door watching for her Mattie.

Sometimes she ate, sometimes she slept, but mostly she waited for her Mattie to rescue her.

And then she got hot. The heat came and did not go away. Miss Elizabeth got too hot to eat, too hot to move, too hot to drink. Voices came in and out of the room. People touched her body. Lots of not-Matties wanted her to drink. But Miss Elizabeth was tired and did not want to do anything but sleep. She dreamed. She dreamed of her red ball and a toe. She dreamed of brown eyes and a rocking chair. She dreamed of sweet milk and shells to hold on to.



Mattie heard Miss Elizabeth’s cries echo down the hall. She paced the room nervously with the new baby in her arms as Miss Elizabeth cried out her name, “Ma-ie, Ma-ie.” It took all of her self-control to stay in the nursery as the panic rose in Miss Elizabeth’s voice. More and more desperately the girl yelled for Mattie.

For hours on end Mattie nursed and rocked, paced and wept as she listened to Miss Elizabeth’s desperate sobs. She waited, expecting to be ordered to go to Miss Elizabeth, but that order did not come. Two days after Jack’s birth the cries became intermittent and the girl’s voice grew hoarse. Two days after that they stopped. The silence was worse than the wailing. Now Mattie knew nothing of Miss Elizabeth.

She asked Skinny Emily when she brought lunch on the fifth day of the new arrangement, “Lisbeth all right?”

“Don’ let none of them hear you callin’ her that. Miss Elizabeth not eatin’ much, but she finally stopped cryin’. I never heard such carryin’ on for so long. You’d think that Charlotte was stickin’ pins in her from the way she yelled.”

“What she doin’ now?”

“When I brung them some lunch, she didn’ head out the door like before. She just layin’ in bed. Guess she gettin’ used it.”

“She sleepin’ all right?”

“It ain’t my place to keep track of that little girl and tell you. And she ain’t yours no more neither.”

Mattie knew not to ask Mrs. Ann, Mr. Wainwright, or Grandmother Wainwright during their visits with baby Jack. However, she did dare to speak to the housekeeper about the situation. Mrs. Gray rejected Mattie’s timid offer to care for both Master Jack and Miss Elizabeth with a curt reply. “That girl is learning that she cannot always have things her way. There is no need to give in to her now.”



Doctor Jameson returned to Fair Oaks for a second time in a week. In addition to examining the newborn baby and the birthing mother, he looked in on Miss Elizabeth. Mrs. Ann and Mrs. Gray hovered nearby as he examined the listless child. Wracked by a high fever for three consecutive days, the toddler lay motionless in bed. He listened carefully to her shallow breathing, noted that her eyes were sunk into her head, and pulled at the skin on the back of her hand. The skin stayed pinched up in a fold for a few seconds before laying flat again. “Dehydration has set in,” Doctor Jameson informed Mrs. Ann and Mrs. Gray. “She must take in liquids or she shall not survive this fever. It is the only treatment.”

Pausing at the door, he emphasized the urgency of the situation. “This is extremely serious. You must do whatever you can to hydrate this child or she will die. I am sorry to be so blunt. But the situation is dire. I can show myself out.”

Stunned at this news, Mrs. Ann stared blankly where the doctor had been standing. Then she spoke, “Charlotte, as quickly as you can, get a concoction of salt, sugar, and water from Cook. Do not hesitate to explain

the urgency of this situation. She must stop whatever she is doing to get you what I need.”

Mrs. Ann waited silently by the bed for Charlotte’s return. Mrs. Gray hovered behind. Charlotte delivered the liquid and retreated to a chair in the corner. With a shaking hand, Mrs. Ann brought the spoon to her daughter’s parched lips.

“Open her mouth,” Mrs. Ann commanded to Mrs. Gray.

“Perhaps sitting her up would be more effective?” suggested the housekeeper.

“Oh, yes, of course,” replied Mrs. Ann, confusion in her eyes. Riddled with childbirth hormones, tired from labor, and anxious about her daughter, it was hard for the young mother to think well. Her arm retreated back to the bowl, spilling liquid along the way.

Mrs. Gray grabbed the child under her armpits, pulled her into an upright position, and rested Miss Elizabeth against the bed pillows. She stepped back. The girl slowly slid sideways in an arc until her head met the bed. Mrs. Ann stared at the girl.

“Perhaps my lap,” she said. “Place her on my lap.”

Mrs. Gray hauled up the child and roughly set her on Mrs. Ann’s thin legs. Mrs. Ann struggled to balance Miss Elizabeth on her lap. She juggled the floppy body of the dozing child like a sack of potatoes. The young mother resumed her attempt to follow the doctor’s order. With one arm she cradled her daughter behind the neck while the other arm traveled back and forth to and from the vessel of liquid. Drops of fluid spilled off the shaking spoon onto the girl’s gown, neck, and chin. By the time it arrived at Miss Elizabeth’s lips, it was nearly empty. Mrs. Ann, determined to save her daughter, kept the spoon moving back and forth, stopping occasionally to wipe away the liquid dribbling down her child’s skin.

“Is she swallowing? I cannot tell!” inquired the mother.

“Hmmp,” Mrs. Wainwright broke in from the doorway where she watched Mrs. Ann’s feeble attempts to hydrate Elizabeth. “I cannot see what good you are possibly doing. Either the fever will break or it will not,” declared the elderly woman. “It is in God’s hands. You must pray for your daughter.”

Mrs. Ann’s hand froze at her mother-in-law’s words. Like a scared bird uncertain in which direction to fly, she clenched the spoon tightly. Closing her eyes and retreating into herself she took a deep breath before silently

resuming her task. Grandmother Wainwright muttered about a “fool’s attempt” as she left the scene.

Though the cup was only half empty, Elizabeth started snoring and her mother could no longer pretend she was feeding her daughter. Mrs. Ann set aside the liquid concoction and returned Elizabeth to her bed. Little of the liquid had made it into Elizabeth’s body. This was not working. With nothing else to do, but grateful to have something to occupy her mind, Mrs. Ann silently recited the Lord’s Prayer over and over until she rested her head against the bed and joined her daughter in slumber.

Hours later, in the dark, Mrs. Ann awoke to the sounds of shallow, labored breathing. She uncovered the small, hot body, and then covered it again. Helpless and uncertain, Mrs. Ann stared at her daughter’s chest rising and falling in a jerky rhythm. Fingers tapping against her lips, standing, then sitting again, she considered sending for more sugar water, then rejected the idea. She thought of sending for cool rags to wipe her daughter down but rejected that idea also because she was struck by another possibility.

She stood up, looking thoroughly around the room to confirm she was alone. She crossed to the door and turned the key to the right until she felt a satisfying click as the lock engaged with the doorframe. Returning to her daughter, she lifted the child, limp as a rag doll, onto her lap. Heart pounding, she unbuttoned her bodice. Miss Elizabeth flopped off her mother’s lap and bumped her head on the seat of the chair. Mrs. Ann returned the small body to the bed, finished the task of unbuttoning her bodice, and peeled her chemise over her head like the skin off a grape.

Her breasts free to the air, she looked around again before pulling her daughter across her lap. She leaned over Elizabeth and brought her breast over the baby’s face. A droplet of white liquid seeped from the dangling nipple and hung from the tip until the force of gravity caused it to drop onto Elizabeth’s eyelid. Both lids slowly rose to reveal glassy blue eyes. Elizabeth gazed at the pink nipple suspended over her head, then at her mother’s hopeful face peering down at her. Mrs. Ann hoped her daughter knew what to do with the offered breast and held her breath in anticipation. Leaning down closer, another drop of milk landed on Elizabeth’s cheek and rolled to her lips. The girl’s tongue crept out and tasted the liquid. Hope rushed through Mrs. Ann’s body. She waited nervously. Elizabeth looked

into her mother's eyes again and then at the offered nipple. Then the baby closed her eyes and turned her head away.

Mrs. Ann sat back hard in the chair with a sigh. Shame and humiliation radiated through every pore. She felt foolish for even trying. She looked down at her fevered daughter and considered her options. She wiped away the sweat from Elizabeth's damp forehead. With another sigh, Mrs. Ann returned her daughter to bed. Blinking away tears, utterly defeated, she slowly pulled her chemise over her body and buttoned up her gown. She was not going to let her daughter die. Ignoring Mrs. Gray and Charlotte, who had been hovering outside the locked door, she went in search of Mattie.

When she found her, Mrs. Ann spoke urgently. "Elizabeth has burned with a high fever for three days. She has not taken a drink since the fever came." Desperation in her voice, she pleaded, "Come now. See if she will drink from you. She must drink something or..." She left the rest unspoken.

Mattie followed Mrs. Ann down the long hallway anxious about the situation she would find. Mrs. Gray stood in the doorway like a sentry.

"I do not believe this is wise," stated Mrs. Gray. "She will not become used to the new arrangement if we bring Mattie every time she fusses."

"I am not concerned with my daughter becoming accustomed," Mrs. Ann declared. "The doctor made it quite clear she must drink something. Let Mattie through. Now!"

Mrs. Gray stood aside. A bitter, metallic smell hung in the air. Miss Elizabeth's small form lay under a light sheet. A rush of tenderness filled Mattie. She reached her hand to Miss Elizabeth's hot forehead and brushed damp hair away from her face.

Kneeling by the bed, she whispered quietly into Miss Elizabeth's ear, "Mattie here now. I here now, beautiful girl. You gonna be all right."

Then she slowly, carefully, lay down next to Miss Elizabeth and gently pulled the baby into the crook of her arm, rubbing her back with one hand while caressing her face with the other.

Mattie murmured repeatedly, "I here now. You gonna be all right."

The child slowly opened her eyes and reached up to Mattie's face. A weak smile drew up the corners of her mouth, her eyes closed again. She buried her face into Mattie's chest. A croaky "Ma-ie" came out of Miss Elizabeth's dry lips.

Relieved, Mattie smiled at the sick child and gave her a tender kiss. “That right. It me. Mattie here. Let see about gettin’ you somethin’ to drink, baby girl.”

Mattie startled when Mrs. Ann interrupted their private reunion, “I will leave you two alone then.”

Filled with a mixture of relief and sorrow, Mrs. Ann turned to Mrs. Gray and spoke definitively, “Elizabeth will move back in with Mattie. See to it that her belongings are returned and a wet nurse is secured for Jack immediately.”

“Yes, ma’am. As you wish,” replied Mrs. Gray, making it clear she questioned Mrs. Ann’s judgment.



Into the baby’s dreams came the real Mattie, not the dream Mattie, but the real one. This Mattie held the girl close and gave her sweet, warm milk. Lisbeth was not scared anymore.

Chapter 5

MAY 1839

Mattie nestled behind her husband as they lay in bed. She loved the feel of Emmanuel against her body. Her hand rubbed his strong chest, her knees spooned into the valley of his legs, and her cheek rested against his back. She planted kisses on his spine and took in his musky smell. Left alone in Samuel and Poppy's cabin, they basked in two glorious days together, a rare treat given by Emmanuel's overseer and agreed to by Mrs. Gray.

Mattie expected that Massa hoped she would produce another child, but she would not give him one. This was not her fertile time, and if it were, she would have taken precautions. Though she longed for more babies, she was not going to have more children that she would have to be separated from.

Emmanuel was an attractive man: deep brown eyes, smooth skin the color of coffee, with strong muscles from years of physical labor. As a child he was drawn to the carpenter's shed where he was put to work as an apprentice rather than being sent to the fields. When he reached manhood, the overseer moved him to the smith shop, where he spent the hours from sun-up to sundown working bars of ore into nails, horseshoes, and spikes. Pouring his frustration and resentment into red, hot metal, he shaped objects that kept the plantation running. Though he hated the plantation and yearned to be free from his bondage, he took great pride in his craft, so he did not intentionally sabotage Massa and the overseer with poor metal work.

Mattie met nineteen-year-old Emmanuel soon after her sixteenth birthday. She had been at a dance that was held in a musty old barn during the one week of the year the field hands did not have to work, the "Big Times" between Christmas and New Year's. She had been sitting on a hay bale, taking in the sights and sounds around her and giggling with Rebecca. Mattie had clapped along to the pounding drum while the folks around her sang:

Juba this and Juba that, Juba killed a yeller cat, Juba this and Juba that, Hold your partner where you at.

She leaped in surprise when a handsome stranger from an unknown plantation invited her to dance with him.

They soon jumped the broom, committing themselves to one another. Once a month Emmanuel made the three-mile walk over to Fair Oaks for a visit. Mostly he came on a Saturday for the night, but a few times a year he was given a Friday off too.

Emmanuel rolled over to face Mattie. "Been thinking this might be the spring to head out."

Mattie sighed. "Thought we already agreed. Samuel too young."

"I been thinkin' I can go on ahead. Then you two join me next year or the year after when Samuel big enough."

"You crazy!" Mattie cried out. "There ain't no way I can travel through the forest all alone with a little one. You leave us and you leaving us for good. This my home. It ain't perfect, but we alive and we get to be together some of the time. You run off to God knows where and maybe we never gonna see you alive again."

"But Ohio ain't that far," Emmanuel insisted. "I gonna make it. I know it."

"Ohio gonna be there in a few years, when Samuel big enough to make the trip. You just hold on a little longer," Mattie said. "It ain't so bad in the meantime."

Emmanuel had been raised on stories of the freedom land. His father, Manny, had made two attempts to secure his freedom as a young man and had the wounds to prove it. Growing up, Emmanuel had begged his father to recount the tales. Manny didn't need much begging, though he pretended to. His wife, on the other hand, chastised him for "filling the boy's head with stories of the promise land."

Emmanuel's father told him, "The first time I ran I wasn't much more than twelve. I was a working out in the fields when suddenly I seen there weren't nobody around me. I just dropped my sack of tobacco and tore off. Made it nearly to the next county when they caught me. My own overseer got me and brung me back. They cut off the top of my ear and sent me back to work the next day."

Right on cue, young Emmanuel asked, as he always did, “Did it hurt? When they cut off your ear?”

“Nah, not so much. It was worth that bit of my ear for a taste of freedom.”

Eventually Emmanuel learned that it had hurt. An infection set in, making his father’s ear swell and ooze pus. Manny gave up most of the hearing in his left ear for those hours on his own.

“The next time I run,” Manny would go on with his tale, “I was sixteen years old or so. I planned it, but God weren’t with me that time either. A sudden storm made the river flood. Made it all the way to the banks of the Moback—two counties away—but then I couldn’ go no further. I know’d if’n I went into the river I’d a never come out again. I wanted freedom, but not to meet my maker. I had no choice. Only thing to do was sit down right by that river and wait. The dogs found me first. See. Right here? I still got their teeth marks on my arm.

“They took my toes the second time. Usually they take the whole foot, but they figured without my three toes I could work good but not run. They was right too. So son, when you ready to take your chances on getting to freedom, I got two things you keep in mind. Wait till you be a full man and run in May or June. It ain’t so cold, but the big thunderstorms ain’t come yet.”



Emmanuel had talked of running the first time he was alone with Mattie. Every winter he made plans for the next spring. Each year she argued that it was too soon. Mattie hoped that Emmanuel’s talk was just that. She didn’t share his dream of freedom, did not want leave her home and family to head out into the wilderness. She desperately hoped her love and their son would make Emmanuel stay. But every year when late spring rolled around, Mattie said a final goodbye in her heart whenever they parted. She expected that one day he would simply be gone.

“Forget about Ohio,” Mattie cajoled, pressing her body into his. “You in Virginia right now, with me, all alone, in this here bed. What you gonna do about that?”

She moved in closer, bringing her mouth so close that she could feel his breath. Emmanuel smiled, gazing through the dim light into her eyes, and

ran his large hands across her back. He kissed her tenderly on her full lips. She parted her mouth, darting the tip of her tongue out to explore his mouth.

Pulling back, he asked, "Do you suppose that little girl gonna interrupt us again?"

"Her name Lisbeth," replied Mattie, "and no, I don' suppose she will. She fine when I left. I don' imagine she be gettin' sick two times in a row."

"Good. I don' want to get all hot and bothered jus' to have you disappear on me," he teased.

"Let's see about gettin' you all hot and bothered."

Pushing him onto his back, she climbed over him, straddling his belly. She kissed him deeply, bringing his tongue into her mouth. She pressed against him until he forgot all of his plans to leave Virginia.

After making love, Emmanuel kissed Mattie, rolled over, and fell asleep. Mattie wrapped her arms around him and nestled in close, her body humming with joy. A good man was hard to come by and she knew she was lucky to have this one. She'd be fully satisfied if she knew she could keep him.



In the sitting room, after Sunday supper, Lisbeth sat with Mother, a book of nursery rhymes open before them, while Father read by the fire. Muttering to himself at regular intervals, he clearly disagreed with the author of this particular text. Grandmother sat on a chair, attempting to look busy with crewel work.

"Mat-tie come?" demanded the anxious two-year-old.

"Elizabeth, you must not speak to me in that tone," admonished Mother.

"Lisbeth want Mat-tie," declared Lisbeth plaintively.

"Elizabeth wants Mattie," Mother corrected. "Well, you must wait. You have no choice. She will be here when she will be here. Now listen to this poem, and be patient."

Lisbeth stared hard at the door, willing the knob to turn. Mother read the next rhyme:

*Hey Diddle Diddle the cat in the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the.....*

Father interrupted. "Listen to this outrage: *As men, as Christians, as citizens, we have duties to the slave, as well as to every other member of the community. On this point we have no liberty. The eternal law binds us to take the side of the injured; and this law is peculiarly obligatory when we forbid him to lift an arm in his own defense.* I cannot believe he has the audacity to speak for Christians when he has clearly announced he is a Unitarian."

"Whatever are you reading?" inquired Grandmother Wainwright.

"Reverend William Ellery Channing's pamphlet *Slavery*."

"I cannot understand why you bother yourself reading such nonsense. It only serves to confuse," declared Grandmother.

"Staying informed is my duty as the head of this household, Mother. I need not remind you of that."

"Some arguments are not worth bothering with."

"Abolitionists are using these very words as a weapon against our way of life. They are out to take away all that we have created."

"Ridiculous!" declared Grandmother Wainwright. "I have heard that my entire life. This country was founded with the understanding that we shall be allowed to hold slaves. It was a condition of the formation. That shall not change regardless of the rhetoric coming from the North."

Ignoring his mother, Father went on to quote from the pamphlet, "This is what Channing says about the government: *It must regard every man, over whom it extends its authority, as a vital part of itself, as entitled to its care and to its provisions for liberty and happiness.* He is implying that Jefferson intended the Constitution to bestow civil rights to Africans. Utterly ridiculous. Our forbearers were quite clear on the matter: slaves are only three-fifths of a man. They are not entitled to the same rights as Christians."

Father continued, "Only someone who has never actually lived with a negro could romanticize their capacities so. Without slavery they would all be starving heathens. We have no pauperism in the South, which is more than Channing can say about his beloved Massachusetts. He does not understand all that we provide for the negroes: basic security for life."

A knock at the door interrupted Father's tirade.

"You may enter," Grandmother Wainwright spoke out.

"Mat-tie!" screamed Lisbeth as she ran over to her nurse, arms out wide, a huge grin splitting her face. "Mat-tie back!"

Mattie squatted down in the doorway, arms outstretched, ready to embrace her charge.

“Elizabeth,” reprimanded Grandmother, “return here at once!”

Lisbeth halted her rush toward the door. With stooped shoulders and her head down she swung around slowly and returned to sit on the couch.

“Now ask your mother if you may be excused,” commanded Grandmother.

Eyes cast down, her voice quiet, Lisbeth inquired, “I be ’scused?”

Mother smiled. Patting Lisbeth’s chubby leg and kissing the top of her head, Mother reassured her, “Yes, dear, you may go. Goodnight.”

Lisbeth scrambled down from the couch and hurried across the room into Mattie’s embrace. She wrapped her arms tight around Mattie’s neck, squeezing hard with her small arms. Then she petted Mattie’s cheeks with her pudgy hands, pushed her nose into Mattie’s face, and exclaimed, “Missed you! Lisbeth missed Mattie.”

“I missed you too, Miss Elizabeth.” Turning to her owners, Mattie said, “Goodnight, Massa. Goodnight, Ma’ams.”

Climbing the stairs was difficult with Lisbeth clutching Mattie’s leg. After nearly tripping over the girl, Mattie picked up Lisbeth and carried her to their rooms. The girl kissed Mattie’s cheek over and over as they walked down the hall, her head bobbing back and forth planting kisses in rhythm with their steps. Lisbeth burrowed her face into Mattie’s neck when she saw Emily, who was putting away clothes in Lisbeth’s room.

“How she do?” inquired Mattie.

“Nothin’ much happened. Mostly she stood by the window and watched. She squeaked like an animal the few times she saw you. She asked me to get you, but I told her she stuck with me. She gonna be tired soon ’cus she didn’ sleep long in the afternoon.”

After getting ready for bed, Mattie led Lisbeth to the window. They watched until the sun set. Then Poppy brought Samuel out to wave goodnight. Mattie blew him an unseen kiss. Lisbeth blew a kiss of her own to the folks outside. Mattie laughed and kissed Lisbeth on the temple.

“That’s a good girl. Now let’s go say our prayers.”

The pair walked to the bed in the anteroom. “Stand here by me,” Mattie directed. “That right, good girl. Now what you happy about today? What you want to thank God for?”

“Mattie back!” exclaimed Lisbeth.

Mattie laughed, “Okay, so we say, ‘Thank you, God, for bringin’ Mattie back.’ Anyone special you thinkin’ about you want God to watch over?”

“Mattie!”

“All right, Mattie. But who else?”

“Baby Jack.”

“Uh huh.”

“Moter.”

“Yeah,” encouraged Mattie.

“Fater.”

“Mm hmm.”

“Granmoter.”

“Yeah, thas right. We say, ‘God, please watch over Baby Jack, Mother, Father, and Grandmother. And if’n we die before we wake, take us straight to heaven, dear Lord. Amen.’”

“A-meh,” echoed Lisbeth.

Before Mattie rose, she made her own prayer. “Lord thank you for my time with my family. Please keep a watch over Samuel and Emmanuel and Rebecca and Poppy and Miss Lisbeth here. Thank you. Amen.”

“A-meh,” echoed Lisbeth once again.

Chapter 6

MARCH 1841

Lisbeth tried to be good. She was a big girl, nearly four years old. She knew she needed to sit still and not talk too much. She tried to keep her pretty blue dress neat and tidy, and she pretended to eat the food on the big white china plate in front of her.

Mattie did not come to “Saturday night supper.” The first time Lisbeth ate in the dining room with all the other people, she asked for Mattie, but Mother said, “You are a big girl now. You do not need Mattie all of the time. I will help you at supper.” Lisbeth was surprised because Mother did not help her very often. But Lisbeth was used to it now and did not miss Mattie too much.

She could just see over the top of the large, rectangular table. She liked looking at herself on the edge of the table best because when she tipped her head up and down and wiggled her mouth around her reflection changed in the dark, shiny wood. She had to be sneaky about it or Grandmother would command, “Elizabeth, sit” even though she was already sitting.

Father filled the large chair at the head of the table, and Mother perched on a chair next to Lisbeth. Lisbeth knew some of the other grown-ups at the table, but not most of them. None of them spoke to her except to say “Hello” and “Good Evening” and “My, you are becoming quite the young lady.” Sometimes she tried to follow what the grown-ups were saying to one another, but mostly she did not understand them.

When Lisbeth got tired of looking at herself on the edge of the shiny table, she scooped down low to look at the grown-ups’ shoes. She studied the stitching and buckles and buttons on feet of all sizes. From above, the adults looked as if they were not moving, but the view from under the table showed otherwise. The adults stretched their legs and wiggled their feet from side to side. Unfortunately Grandmother Wainwright noticed this game and commanded Lisbeth to “sit up straight.”

So Lisbeth sat up but swung her legs back and forth. She swung them, making her legs go higher and higher. She held her body still so Grandmother Wainwright would not scold her for wiggling around. Suddenly she bumped the table with her leg. She stared straight ahead, hoping no one noticed. No one had. The water in her glass wiggled a bit, but nothing else happened. She tried it again. Swinging her leg forward she kicked the table just a tiny bit to make her water dance. It worked. She did it again. But this time she kicked the table too hard.

Lisbeth watched in horror as the water glass tipped sideways into the bowl of potatoes, filling it with clear liquid before landing on the table and rolling around, dribbling the last bit of water in a circle on the tablecloth.

Father yelled in his big voice, "Behave, Elizabeth," his eyes boring into her.

Grandmother glared at Lisbeth with her scrunchy, angry face.

Scared, Lisbeth started crying and called out, "Mattie, Mattie."

Father insisted, "No, Elizabeth, you may not run to Mattie. You must stay at the table and eat."

Mother patted Lisbeth's small white hand as she shushed her, "Be quiet now. Hush up. It is over. Stop your tears."

Mother was trying to be kind, but she was of little comfort. Lisbeth wanted Mattie, not Mother. Lisbeth sat in her chair, looked at her lap, and held back her tears. Her stomach was clenched tight so she did not eat anything, but Father did not care. He only wanted her to sit quietly until the grown-ups finished their meal and left the table.

In bed that night, lying side by side under the covers after prayers, Lisbeth told Mattie about the evening. "I made the water fall over and Father got mad. I cried for you. I said, 'Mattie, Mattie, Mattie' over and over and over again. But Mother and Father made me stay. It was awful."

"Lisbeth, honey, when you miss me you jus' sing our special song real quiet to yourself. You gonna feel like I with you even when I far away."

Mattie sang the familiar lullaby in her clear, strong voice; Lisbeth's sweet, high voice joined in. Snuggling into the warmth of Mattie's body, Lisbeth reached up to rub the shells on the string in the hollow of Mattie's neck. Singing and rubbing, humming and touching, Lisbeth drifted off to sleep during the third verse:

You're a sweet little baby
You're a sweet little baby
Honey in the rock and the sugar don't stop
Gonna bring a bottle to the baby

Chapter 7

The heavy, oppressive August heat drove Mattie and Lisbeth to take their afternoon rest in the shade of a large willow tree. The old tree, which grew between the Big House and the Quarters, was a favorite spot for both of them. Lisbeth loved the private world the enormous green canopy provided them. Mattie appreciated the opportunity to view her son. She always settled them on the side facing the Quarters so she might get a glimpse of the tall and lanky boy bringing drinks to the sweaty workers in the tobacco fields beyond the cabins. At five years old, Samuel had lost his toddler roundness and was full of energy, toting water up and down the lines of workers.

Lying next to Mattie on an old quilt, Lisbeth traced the pattern of the fabric with her finger. She lifted her head off the blanket and asked, "Mattie, who do you suppose made this quilt?"

"Don' know. A bondswoman who lived here long ago. It older than you or me. I bet it even older than your grandmother."

"Is she dead?"

"Who?"

"The slave."

"Imagine so." Mattie laughed, amused at the little girl's question.

Lisbeth looked puzzled until she finally asked, "Do you think slaves and people go to the same heaven?"

"Slaves is people. Never heard 'bout more than one heaven, so I 'magine there only the one."

"Who does the work?" wondered Lisbeth.

"There ain't no work in heaven," declared Mattie.

Lisbeth looked like she was full of more questions. She pondered Mattie's answer for a while before asking, "Do you miss your momma, Mattie?"

“Everyday. But I know she watchin’ over me, from heaven.”

“Is she watching over me too?” Lisbeth asked, yearning in her voice.

Mattie thought for a minute, then nodded slowly. “Yes, Lisbeth, she watchin’ over you. She watchin’ on all the people I love.”

Lisbeth replied confidently, “You will see her again when you get to heaven. And I can meet her. Did she take care of you everyday?”

“Until she got sold away.”

“Did you cry when she left? How big were you?” Lisbeth inquired.

“Just past eight years. ’Course I cried. Every night I cried in bed. Poppy or Rebecca sat with me, but it ain’t the same.”

“You will not ever let them sell you, will you?” implored Lisbeth as she clutched tight to Mattie’s skirt. “I will cry real hard if they sell you.”

“I got no choice. Your father decide such things. I ain’t gonna make you no promise I don’t get to keep.”

Tears formed in Lisbeth eyes. “I shall ask Mother to give you to me when I am grown and then you will be with me forever,” Lisbeth declared emphatically. “Then no one can sell you away.”

Flattered and insulted, Mattie did not respond to Lisbeth but lay in silence waiting for the child to fall asleep. Lisbeth laid her head down on the quilt and closed her eyes while Mattie slowly and gently rubbed her back. Holding onto the folds of Mattie’s dress, rubbing the material between her thumb and her forefinger, it was obvious that ideas and questions floated in Lisbeth’s mind.

“What was your mama like?”

“She had a real pretty voice. She sang all the time. Her favorite lullaby same as you, ‘Nobody but the Baby.’ Yellow her favorite color. Every spring we go on a hunt for yellow crocuses.”

“Crocuses?” wondered Lisbeth.

Mattie replied, “It a flower that come out first in spring. It kinda little and don’t last for so long. But it tell you spring come.”

“Oh, Mattie, can we do that?” Lisbeth sat up and exclaimed, “Hunt for crocuses? I love hunts.”

“Yes, honey,” Mattie smiled, “next spring we can look for the crocuses.”

“Mattie, did your momma have a name?” Lisbeth asked.

“Of course she had a name!” Mattie scoffed. “Every body got a name! She called Naomi, from the Bible. Now that enough about my momma. You lay back down and you go to sleep. I gonna tell you more about her later.”

Mattie sang as Lisbeth drifted off to sleep. While her young charge breathed in deep and long, Mattie sat up and scooted toward the low-hanging branches. She parted the branches slightly to get a better view. As she watched for her son she thought about the last time she saw her own mother.



January first was accounting day on the plantation. Following a delicious week of resting and visiting for the field slaves came the most dreaded day of the year. After the midday meal of black-eyed peas, thought to bring good luck in the coming year, Massa and the overseer gathered everyone to announce sales and rentals. Pleading or arguing did no good. If your name was on the list, you left the next day. A rental at a nearby plantation was the best of a bad situation. That meant visits most Sundays if it was close by or, if it was farther away, a visit once a year at the Big Times, the winter holidays. A sale to a slave trader heading into Georgia or Louisiana was devastating news. It meant never seeing your family again and likely an early death, though no one knew for certain. News of family sold south rarely made it back to Fair Oaks.

On New Year's Day 1822 all the anxious slaves gathered on the grounds in front of the Big House. Those good-luck peas sat hard in their churning stomachs as they listened to Massa Wainwright's announcement. Mattie stood up tall, wrapped in her mother's strong arms. Nearly eight, Mattie was old enough to be rented or sold. She felt the tension running through her mother's body as the overseer read the list, his deep voice showing no hint of emotion.

"Benjamin, Olivia, and Miriam to be rented to Berkeley. Young James, Daniel, and Frances to be rented to Willowbrook. Loisa, Sugar, and Wilametta rented to White Pines."

Mattie's mother, Naomi, pulled her tighter as Massa moved on to the sold list.

"Wilamena sold to Westover. Benny sold to Cumberland. Naomi sold to Hopewell."

Fingers clawed deep into Mattie's shoulder. Though the names went on, Mattie did not hear them. Her mother's name was on the list, and hers was

not. She did not know how far Hopewell was, whether it meant weekly or yearly visits, but she knew her mother was leaving her.

“No!” she cried out. Her mother’s fingers flew over her mouth hard and fast. Smothered by the rough hand, her protest did not make it to Massa’s ears.

That afternoon and night sorrow hung as heavy as a burial. Early the next morning, before the sun fully rose, her mother packed up her few belongings. She untied the necklace from her own throat and bit off a single shell with her teeth. Then she placed the necklace on Mattie’s neck, keeping the single shell for herself.

“You keep this safe till I come back. This came from my momma who got it from her momma, all the way back. I gonna keep one. You always gonna be connected through these shells, not jus’ to me, but to all the women folk that came before us. We are strong women, Mattie. You one of us, so you strong too.”

Mattie nodded silently, her throat too full to let words pass.

They joined the other families outside waiting to be torn apart. Mattie wrapped her arms around her mother and clung tight.

Naomi cupped Mattie’s small chin and stared intensely into her eyes. Fiercely she whispered, “Momma loves you. Momma always gonna love you. You carry me in your heart for always. I gonna be back next Big Times.” Then she broke away from Mattie’s embrace and climbed into the wagon.

Flanked by Poppy and Rebecca, Mattie had watched her mother grow smaller and smaller as she was driven away. In her mind, Mattie shouted, “Mama, don’ leave me. Take me with you.” To the world she stood sturdy and calm like a thick tree trunk planted firmly in the ground.

That was the last time Mattie saw her mother. She might have protested more if she had known that her mother would not be returning for the Big Times. Soon after she departed Fair Oaks Naomi died of an infection and was returned to the earth without ceremony. When word of her death came three months after she took her last breath, her family erected a plain wooden cross in her honor in the negro cemetery on Fair Oaks. Her empty tomb sat amidst Mattie’s great-great-grandparents, great-grandmother, grandmother, grandfather, and father overlooking the James River.

Sitting under the shade of the willow tree, unconsciously stroking Lisbeth’s hair, Mattie made a promise to herself and her son. If the overseer

ever went to sell either of them, she was taking Samuel and running.



That evening, when the Wainwright family was gathered in the drawing room, Lisbeth had a string of questions for her mother. “What was your mother like?” the little girl wondered.

“What a question, Elizabeth,” Mother replied, surprised at her daughter’s inquiry.

“What did she look like?”

“Actually, you favor her. Your eyes are very similar to hers. Though I hardly remember my mother.”

“Why?”

“I was quite young when she died, perhaps eight or nine. I hardly remember her at all.”

The five-year-old’s curiosity was undaunted. “What was her favorite song?”

“Goodness. I have no idea.”

“Did she sing to you?” Lisbeth asked.

“No.”

“Did she have a favorite flower?”

“Favorite flower? No, I cannot say that she did. Or if she did, I did not know about it.”

“What was her favorite color?”

A small smile passed over Mother’s face. “Blue. Deep blue. She favored that because she thought it brought out her eyes.”

Satisfied with that one nugget of information, Lisbeth’s mind flitted to a new topic. “Mother, can Samuel come in? Mattie would be happier if Samuel was here. I shall share her with him.”

Mother laughed. “You are a sweet one, Elizabeth. It is very kind that you care about Mattie. She is very fortunate to be with you. I can assure you, though, that it is best for Samuel to stay in the Quarters and best for Mattie to stay here caring for you.”

“But—” Lisbeth started to interrupt.

Mother went on without pause, “Samuel would not be at all comfortable in the house. There is nothing for him to do here. They can visit with one

another every week, which is more frequent than most workers can visit with their families.”

Lisbeth knew there was no point in talking about it further. Although Lisbeth did not understand her mother’s reasoning, it was settled. Mattie would stay with her. Samuel would stay outside. That was for the best for everyone.

Chapter 8

SPRING 1843

Lisbeth was surprised when Mattie relented to her cajoling. Lisbeth had been confined to her bed for several days with a head cold. So she was left behind when the Wainwrights left for church after Mother declared her unfit to sit for hours in a cold, damp building. Lisbeth asked to venture out to the Quarters with Mattie as soon as her family's carriage pulled away. Lisbeth didn't want to be left with Emily. And it had been such a long time since she visited the Quarters. Lisbeth's pleading eventually worked and Mattie finally agreed.

Lisbeth was excited as they walked down the dirt path to the shanties. Mattie prepared Lisbeth for the visit by reminding her who lived in the Quarters. "We gonna see Samuel, of course, and Poppy. We also gonna visit with Rebecca and all of her family: Lawrence, Sarah, Henry, and Frank. You remember Sarah, she a bit older than you."

Lisbeth did not need the reminder. She knew these people well from watching them each day out of her window. However, when they arrived at the Quarters she was suddenly uncertain and nervous. Watching this place was familiar. Being here felt strange.

Lisbeth hid her eyes in the folds of Mattie's long skirt as they approached Poppy and Samuel's cabin. Murmurs from the people gathered on the benches outside floated over to them. Mattie smiled when she made out the sound of her son's voice. He broke out into a wide grin as soon as he saw Mattie come round the corner from behind the cabin.

"You lost both your top teeth!" Mattie exclaimed and cupped his chin in her hand to took a close look at Samuel's gap-toothed smile. "You throw 'em on the roof and make a wish?"

"Uh huh. And it come true. Look!"

Mattie followed the trail of Samuel's pointing finger to see her man smiling over at her.

“Emmanuel!” cried Mattie as they rushed to embrace, with Lisbeth trailing close behind her. “What you doin’ here? It ain’t your visiting time till next week.”

“They needed some horses brung over so I told ’em I take ’em.”

“It so good to see you,” Mattie beamed up at her husband.

They held one another close, taking in the other’s warmth and smell. A wave of comfort ran down Mattie’s spine as her husband held her. She was home in his arms. As Mattie stepped back from Emmanuel’s embrace she stumbled over Lisbeth clutching to her skirts.

“For goodness sakes,” cried Mattie. “Lisbeth! Come out here and say hello. You ’member Samuel and Rebecca and Poppy and Sarah and everyone else. This here my husband Emmanuel. You seen him out the window. But you ain’t never seen him in person.”

Lisbeth stared at the man before her. She was so surprised to meet Emmanuel in person that she was at a loss for words.

“Cat got your tongue?” Emmanuel teased.

“No, it is right here,” Lisbeth responded, and without thinking, she stuck it out. The instant her tongue poked out of her mouth, she realized her mistake. Horrified, her eyes popped open wide as her hand rushed to cover her mouth. Everyone else laughed.



Gathered on the benches attached to the outside of the cabin with Lisbeth and Samuel pressed close on either side of her, Mattie reported to her son, “Four, five, two, seven, nine, two, and eight.”

“No, Mattie, it was six on Friday,” Lisbeth inserted.

“She right!” exclaimed Samuel. He turned sharply and scowled at Lisbeth with hard, narrowed eyes. “You watchin’ through the window too? With my momma?”

“Yes. We both count the number of fingers you put up each morning. You cannot see me standing there as well?”

“No,” Samuel muttered.

“They can’ see in, Lisbeth,” Mattie explained.

Lisbeth turned around to look at her window to see the truth of it for herself. The glass reflected the sunlight.

Samuel glared at Lisbeth, then at his mother and back at the white girl. He jumped off the bench and ran away.

Mattie flew after him. Left at the bench, Lisbeth watched Mattie cajole Samuel. She kissed the top of his head, tickled him under the arms, and hugged him from behind. Samuel ran from Mattie; Mattie chased after him. He allowed himself to be caught then squirmed away from his mother's attention.

Lisbeth had grown up on Sunday evening stories of Samuel and Emmanuel and everyone else. She had watched their comings and goings out the window twice a day since she was a baby. First thing in the morning and just before supper she stood beside Mattie to count Samuel's fingers and check on his world. She knew these people. But today, Lisbeth saw something else. Seeing Mattie here with them, she understood that this was Mattie's family. Mattie belonged here; this was Mattie's home. A pit opened in Lisbeth's stomach. Suddenly she did not want to be here anymore. She longed to be an observer of this place, looking down upon it from her room with Mattie by her side.

Sarah, Rebecca's long-limbed daughter, bounded up to Lisbeth on the bench. "Miss Lisbeth, Auntie Mattie says to teach you somethin'."

"Oh, that is all right," Lisbeth stammered, blinking away tears. "Thank you, though."

"She says I got to!"

Mattie yelled across the way, "Learn somethin' new, Lisbeth—Sarah gonna teach you."

"All right," Lisbeth acquiesced, though she was uncertain.

"It go like this—put your hand up, fingers open by your shoulders, like this."

Lisbeth followed Sarah's directions and mirrored the posture of the girl across from her. Sarah pounded out a rhythm in a complicated pattern alternately clapping her hands together and slapping them against her own knees or Lisbeth's hands.

Sarah chanted while her hands flew,

*Little Sally Walker, sitting in a saucer,
Rise, Sally rise, wipe your weeping eyes,
Put your hands on your hips and let your back bone slip*

*Shake it to the east, shake it to the west,
Shake it to the one that you love the best. ”*

“You are so fast!” Lisbeth exclaimed when Sarah finished.

“Everyone always sayin’ how fast I go,” Sarah boasted. “I the fastest tobacco picker for my age.”

“I could never clap like that.”

“‘Course you can! I show you slow now.”

Sarah’s callused palms clapped against Lisbeth’s smooth skin. Over and over Sarah moved her hands slowly, chanting out the song until Lisbeth sang along. After a while Lisbeth dared to move her hands along with the rhyme, often making mistakes. The girls burst out laughing whenever Lisbeth missed a step and clapped up into Sarah’s face instead of her own knees or hands.

“You gettin’ it,” Sarah encouraged.

“Not as good as you.”

“Just practice, you gonna get better.”

“I have no one to practice with.”

“Auntie Mattie real good at this one. Practice with her.”

Lisbeth jerked her head in Mattie’s direction. “Mattie knows this game?” Lisbeth’s eyebrows furrowed as she stared at her nurse.

“Oh, yeah. Auntie Mattie know lots of hand clapping games. She taught me some good ones.”

Lisbeth studied her nurse playing with Samuel and Emmanuel in the distance. There was so much about Mattie that she had not seen before. Mattie’s head was thrown back, her mouth open wide in hard laughter as her son and husband ganged up to tickle her. Lisbeth felt her understanding of the world come apart and slowly reform. A sickening realization dawned: Mattie loved her life here, away from Lisbeth.

Sarah studied Lisbeth studying Mattie. Waiting patiently, Sarah stood in front of Lisbeth ready to resume the game whenever the young mistress of the plantation wished.



The Ford family, the oldest white family in the valley, was in attendance for supper. Though they were not prosperous by Tidewater standards, as

founders of the valley they enjoyed high social status. The six members of the family—mother, father, three boys, and a girl—shared similar looks: pale skin with ruddy cheeks, soft blue eyes, and sandy blonde hair. The sons, ages ten, eight, and seven, were a blur of motion. Mary, the youngest at six, was a calm contrast to her brothers.

Lisbeth kept glancing across the table to watch her friend seated next to Jack. Adorned in a stiff pink dress with white lace at the collar, Mary quietly ate her food, hardly looking up from her plate. Lisbeth found no entertainment in her. Situated between the two “Berts,” Albert and Robert, Lisbeth played tap the table. Having made her own water dance, she tried out her skills on her neighbors’ glasses. She stretched out her right foot ever so slowly and gently touched the table, making a slight shiver in Albert’s water. He did not notice her sly movements. Switching to her left foot, she needed to be more cautious. Robert would tattle simply to make the dinner more interesting. Carefully she raised her left knee at an angle and raised her leg until her toes were nearly at the table when Robert accidentally struck her leg hard with his knee, causing Lisbeth to smash against the table. Robert’s water glass, along with Jack’s, fell over. Instantly water rushed off of the table all over Grandmother Wainwright who screeched loudly, drawing all the attention from the people seated at the table.

Grandmother Wainwright leapt up, fury written all over her face. Lisbeth braced herself for a scolding, but Grandmother did not look at her. Instead she towered over Jack with a large spoon gripped tight in her hand. He cowered from her.

Grandmother Wainwright struck Jack once on the head with the spoon as she screamed at him, “You careless, careless boy! You are not fit to eat at the table. If you do not learn your manners you will never grow up to be a true gentleman. Now apologize to me at once.”

Shaking all over, Jack barely squeaked out an apology to his grandmother.

Father broke in, “Now apologize to our guests for intruding upon our fine meal too.”

“I am sorry,” he spoke out, though his face showed anything but remorse. Staring at the table, his eyes flashed with anger and his lip curled in frustration at the injustice.

“No need to apologize,” Mr. Ford replied. “With these three boys, we have spills ten times a week at our table. If I had a nickel for every upset

glass I would be as wealthy as Cunningham.”

“We do not put up with such behavior in this household,” declared Grandmother Wainwright. “If you will excuse me, I shall take my leave to put on a dry gown.”

After supper, the two families gathered in the parlor. Lisbeth, finally next to Mary on one end of the couch, confessed into her friend’s ear, “I knocked the water over, not Jack. Robert struck me with his knee and then I struck the table.”

“Poor Jack,” Mary declared. “He was punished though he did nothing.”

“I wished to say so, but I did not want to be punished as well.”

“The spoon must have hurt! I would have cried.”

“Me too. But Jack does not cry when he gets struck as it only makes Grandmother Wainwright more cross and she hits him all the more. It is best simply to stay clear of her,” Lisbeth said. “Now I have something to show you. Put your hands up, like this.”

Mary did as she was told. Lisbeth showed Mary the game Sarah had taught her that morning. She whispered the words of the chant as her hands moved in rhythm. The two friends, in their own private bubble, startled when Father broke in.

“Whatever are you doing?” he inquired.

Lisbeth replied quietly, “I am only teaching Mary a game that Sarah taught me today.”

“Who is Sarah?”

“Mattie’s niece. She calls Mattie ‘Auntie.’ It sounds strange, ‘Auntie Mattie’.”

Father looked at Mother. “Do you think it wise to let her play in the Quarters?”

“I used to play with the pickaninnies as a child. It did me no harm. In fact, I believe it is good for her to be exposed to them. She needs to understand their ways.”

Mr. Ford spoke up. “I absolutely agree. Our children must be familiarized with them in order to be successful masters and mistresses.”

Lisbeth watched Father’s face, waiting for his approval. When it came, as a nod, she turned back to her friend.



Lying in bed, Lisbeth thought about the day while Mattie sat nearby humming a tune. The girl's voice broke into the calm night. "Mattie, when I lose a tooth, can I throw it on the roof and make a wish?"

"Don' see why not."

"You think Samuel and Poppy will let me use their roof? Mine is too high to reach."

"I can ask 'em. I 'magine they gonna say yes."

"Do you think the wish will come true if it is not on my own house?" wondered Lisbeth.

"I don' suppose I know all about wishes, but I don' see why not. Now you hush up and go to sleep."

Mattie resumed her own thoughts while Lisbeth lay quietly in bed. After some time, Mattie spoke into the silence with a false casualness. "Lisbeth, what you think about me invitin' Samuel to be with us under the willow? Maybe you teach him a bit what you been learnin' about books and numbers?"

"Yes," Lisbeth replied in a dream-coated voice, innocently agreeing to betray her parents.

Chapter 9

Mattie relished Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. All felt right in the world as she sat under the broad willow tree sandwiched between Lisbeth and Samuel, listening to her son and her Lisbeth go over the shapes and sounds of letters and words. The anxiety she had felt when Samuel first joined them evaporated as weeks turned into months then into more than a year without any hint of being discovered.

Under the willow between the Quarters and the Big House proved to be a perfect place to meet. Weather permitting, Mattie and Lisbeth had been going there most afternoons since Lisbeth was a toddler, first for naps and then for studying. None of the white folks suspected that Samuel joined them under the willow two afternoons a week. The wispy green branches now hung so low that they could not be seen from the Quarters or the fields, and the dark brown trunk was so wide they were hidden from the Big House.

It took some doing, getting Samuel away without the overseer knowing, but in nearly two years he had hardly missed a lesson. Rebecca, Lawrence, and others worked extra to cover Samuel's share of planting or picking while he was away. The overseer didn't pay much attention to the comings and goings of a young boy, so long as all the work was getting done. Though only Samuel slipped out to the willow tree, other children in the Quarters were learning to read as well. He brought his knowledge back to the cabins, and by scratching into the dirt, he taught Sarah and some other children to unlock the mystery of letters.

Having mastered all of Lisbeth's reading primers, Samuel now read from the Holy Bible. Mattie loved hearing her son's lips form the words of the Lord. On a hot late-summer day, sheltered by the cool of the tree, resting her head against the smooth bark of the trunk, she closed her eyes and listened to the soft sounds of the children. Samuel sat to her left, Lisbeth sat

to her right, and the Bible was open upon her lap. Samuel easily read most of the book and only needed assistance from Lisbeth when a particularly difficult word came along. Occasionally they worked together to sound out a word that was beyond Lisbeth's vocabulary. They delighted when they found names of friends and family members, such as Rebecca, Mary, or Sarah, and chuckled over unfamiliar names like Epoch.

"Eeepooooch," Samuel drew out in a silly voice. The three of them laughed hard and long until they had stitches in their sides.

Recently the lessons began to include writing. Even Mattie learned to write her name, though she refused Lisbeth's offer to teach her any letters beyond M-A-T-T-I-E, arguing, "I don' see how I ever gonna have any use for writin' my own name, much less any other letterin'. I jus' glad to know the shape of it. You jus' keep on learnin' Samuel his letters. You young folks need readin' and writin', not me."

Samuel had mastered writing capital letters and was moving on to lower case. Using the ground as a chalkboard, he copied the shapes Lisbeth wrote in the dirt. Again and again Samuel formed careful loops and lines while his mother listened. The children teased her that she fell asleep during the lessons, but Mattie insisted she was "jus' resting her eyes."

"All the letters are correct except the 'q.' See how the loop is to the back?" Lisbeth pointed out to Samuel. "You are making a 'g'."

Samuel tried again. "Like this?"

"No, this direction." Lisbeth showed him.

Samuel tried again.

"You are still making it backwards. This is a 'g'," Lisbeth instructed, reaching over Mattie to guide Samuel's hand with her own to form the distinct letters, "and this is a 'q'."

"Don' do that!" Mattie sat forward quickly and barked. She leapt up, grabbed Samuel by the arm, and yelled, "Never touch a white girl! Never! Do you hear me?" Spit flew from her mouth. "You gonna get yourself killed!"

The two children stared at Mattie, frozen in fear with their hearts beating fast. Neither one had ever seen Mattie so angry.

Trembling with rage and adrenelin, Mattie hissed into Samuel's face, "Now go! Back to the fields. You done learnin' for the day."

Her hand dug into Samuel's arm as she spun him around toward the Quarters and shoved him hard between his shoulder blades. His back

hunched over, Samuel rubbed his arm and walked away from the trunk without a word.

“Get your hat!” Mattie hissed at him. Samuel always returned to the fields with his hat on his head. The head covering was his cover for being away from the fields if the overseer caught him. He parted the willow branches and peered around before he left their cool shelter.

“Stupid boy. Stupid, stupid, stupid,” Mattie mumbled to herself.

“I am sorry, Mattie,” Lisbeth’s small voice apologized. “I was only trying to teach him. I did not know it was dangerous.”

“Well, your not knowin’ might get my son killed someday. He can never touch a white girl. Never,” Mattie muttered under her breath. “Never touch a white lady.”

Chapter 10

MARCH 1847

Lisbeth sat all alone in the shade of her beloved willow tree reading. Now that she was nearly ten years old, Lisbeth was expected to take care of herself during the day while Mattie attended to other chores. This afternoon Mattie was ironing sheets. Samuel, his reading and writing lessons complete, no longer joined her under the tree either. Those conspiratorial afternoons were a part of the past, though Lisbeth occasionally gave Mattie a book to sneak to Samuel.

Taking a moment to enjoy the luscious spring day, Lisbeth was surprised to hear the sound of jeering intrude upon her quiet. It was rare that anyone came near her private fortress. She listened as taunting voices got louder and louder. She made her way to the edge of the tree and parted the branches. Her brother and his friends were in the clearing behind the Quarters. Lisbeth was appalled when she realized what she was seeing. Her brother, Jack, was showing off for some of his older friends—Edward Cunningham, Nathaniel Jackson, and William Anderson—by harassing one of the negroes. They made a ring around their victim, taunting and threatening him with a rope that swung from Jack's hands.

Lisbeth threw down her book and stormed down the rise to her brother and his friends. She hated the way they tormented the field hands for sport. As she got closer her breath caught. Their victim was Samuel! His head was bowed and he did not see her approaching. Shame and rage poured through her, but she covered her feelings quickly. She knew she must handle this right or she would make things worse, as Jack was not inclined to take directions from his older sister.

As she walked up to the boys she was careful not to look at Samuel lest she betray that he mattered to her. Mustering as much self-righteous indignation as possible, doing her best to mask her fear, Lisbeth haughtily

declared, "You are disturbing my reading. You know you are supposed to let me study."

"Study elsewhere," Jack taunted without taking his eyes off of Samuel.

"I do not wish to," Lisbeth stated. "You know this is my preferred place to learn. What are you doing?"

"Teaching this nigger to show us respect."

"Father does not approve when you interfere with the niggers," she replied.

"He does not care about this one," Jack replied with a sneer. "He is to be sold. We do not need another buck around here." Jack turned his gaze to Lisbeth and stared hard.

Stunned by the news, but not wanting to reveal anything to her brother, Lisbeth lied, "Well, I do not care about him either. I simply want to study in peace. Now go elsewhere."

She stared hard at her brother, not allowing herself to glance at Samuel or avert her eyes. Jack stared back. Lisbeth did not look away. She felt the eyes of the onlookers pass back and forth between the two of them. Her hands were moist but she did not make a move to wipe them dry.

Finally Jack snorted and looked away. "Come on," he said to his friends, "there are frogs down at the creek. I bet I catch the biggest one."

The tension broke the instant the boys, done playing at being men, walked away without a backwards glance, their minds on their next task. The gang frolicked like a pack of puppies, bumping into one another as they made their way down the path. Lisbeth sighed with relief and wiped her damp hands on her gown. She had done it—she had driven off her brother and his friends.

With Jack gone, Lisbeth dared to look at Samuel. She studied him as he glared after Jack. Rage burned on his face. His tormentors played with one another, not giving him another thought.

When they were entirely alone, Lisbeth quietly, shamefully spoke, "I am sorry, Samuel. I will tell Mattie what Jack said. It will be all right."

Samuel stared at Lisbeth, fury beaming from his eyes. Her eyes welled up; her chest tightened.

"It will be all right," she insisted, trying to convince herself as much as Samuel.

A cold, hard look sat on Samuel's face. Without a word, he shook his head, turned away, and made his way back to his cabin.

Counting her steps as she walked, 1...2...3..., Lisbeth returned to the willow. She sat down, picked up her book in her shaking hands, and pretended to read. She willed her heart to slow down, taking deep breaths. After she calmed herself, she ran to Mattie.

Mattie was in their rooms, waiting to dress Lisbeth for supper. A breathless Lisbeth blurted out, "Mattie, Jack says Samuel is to be sold! He might only be teasing, but it may be true."

Mattie sank into the rocking chair. Lisbeth stared intently at her nurse waiting for a response.

Lisbeth broke the long silence. "Mattie, he will be fine. They will sell him to someone nice."

"Hush!" Mattie snapped as she stared blankly. "Let me think."



That night Lisbeth and Mother sat in the drawing room with embroidery hoops in their hands. Mother occupied one side of the divan while Lisbeth sat at an angle to her in an upholstered chair.

"Let me see your stitches," Mother commanded.

Lisbeth passed her work into judging hands. Mother studied the needlework carefully.

"Much improved, Elizabeth. Although you still tend toward carelessness in your transitions. Right here, the transition from sky to cloud is too tight, see how the material puckers? And here it is too loose. Tear out these areas. But the rest is quite acceptable."

A timid knock interrupted them.

"Enter," Mother called.

"Oh, Mattie, it is you," smiled Mother. "Time for bed, Elizabeth."

Lisbeth finished snipping out a stitch and left the unfinished pillow case bound in the hoop in the basket next to her chair. "Good night, Mother," said Lisbeth as she stood.

"Kisses, dear," reminded Mother.

Lisbeth returned and kissed her Mother's smooth, pale cheek before joining Mattie.

Before the pair departed, Mattie spoke out, her voice shaking with emotion. "Mrs. Ann, I...uh...got somethin' to ask you, ma'am. I need a

favor real bad. I cared for your daughter all these years and now I, uh, need your help.”

“My goodness, Mattie,” declared Mother, “come out with it.”

“My son, Samuel, is to be sold, ma’am,” Mattie begged. “Please, ma’am, please see to it he gets sold to where his Daddy live—over at Berkeley. They need some men there. Please, ma’am.”

Uncomfortable witnessing her nurse’s despair, Lisbeth looked away. Standing by the door, she longed to leave yet wanted to hear her mother’s response. She pretended not to listen as her eyes followed the trail of gold flowers.

“Mattie, as you well know, I have nothing to do with the field hands. They are Mr. Wainwright’s affair.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But I will pass on your request. He is not an unreasonable man. If he can get a fair price...” Mother hastily added, “I am making you no promise, you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am.” Mattie nodded as she left the room.



A week later, Mrs. Ann gave Mattie an answer when she came for Lisbeth in the drawing room. “Mattie, I am sorry, but Mr. Wainwright was unable to fulfill your request. He has arranged for Samuel to be sold to the Andersons. Their estate is only three miles away. He will be able to visit with you on Sundays. You can be consoled by that.”

Lisbeth stared at the stony face of her nurse as they made their way to her room in absolute silence. Mattie radiated an emotion that Lisbeth could not name. Each step up the staircase and down the long hallway weighed heavily.

Once the door to their rooms closed Lisbeth cried out, “I am sorry, Mattie. But he is not going far. You will get to see him once a week, just like you do now.”

“I get to see my son everyday, twice a day or more, out that window. It ain’t much, but it been enough. Ain’t nothing you can say that is gonna make this better for me. Don’ even try.”



Mattie and Emmanuel whispered in the dark, making plans in response to the news that Samuel would be leaving for the Anderson estate. Mattie was finally ready to take their chances on freedom.

“It too soon,” Emmanuel insisted. “The rain might come still.”

“You saying you want Samuel just to stay there? All alone?”

“He strong. He smart. He gonna be all right for a while.”

Mattie started to cry. “What if they...”

“I know some folks there. I gonna tell them to keep an eye on him. Six weeks after the first sign of spring, that the best timing. You know I thought about this...lots. We got to plan careful and not rush if we want any chance to make it.”

Mattie nodded silently.

Emmanuel went on, “We got to set things up with the right folks.”

“How you know we can trust them?”

Emmanuel shrugged, “Got no choice but to trust strangers. They say it their Christian duty.”

Mattie had nothing else to say. She rested her head against Emmanuel’s warm chest and let her tears fall against his skin. His comforting pats led to slow, sweet love-making. Mattie did not concern herself with the fact that it was her fertile time.

Chapter 11

Mattie did not cry as she gave Samuel final directions. He stood before her, trying to look brave, but she knew he was scared, nearly as terrified as she was.

“They gonna put you with all men, young and old. If someone nice to you, offer you some of his food, you stay away from him. Find an old man, as old as Poppy, and stay close. Keep to yourself if you don’ find an old man. Sleep with your back to the wall if you can.”

Samuel looked confused, but he nodded.

Mattie went on, “Hold tight till you hear from us. Your daddy say it gonna be in six weeks or so. Don’ worry if it longer. We ain’t gonna forget about you, I promise. We got to wait for a sign of spring.”

Mattie pulled out a piece of paper with a drawing. “Here the map he drew up. Study it good, but keep it hidden inside your shoe. Make it look like it part of the shoe. We gonna meet by this tree when the time come. But that not for a while. I gonna see you next Sunday. They gonna let you walk here. Go on the main road. Keep the river to your left and you find your way back. It gonna take you half the morning to get here so start early—just at sunrise.”

Mattie returned to her room, sat down on her bed, and let the tears flow. Salty water streamed down her cheeks, soaking into her dusty skirt. Wracked by sobs, her shoulders jerked up and down in rhythm with her breath. She collapsed onto the bed, burying her face in the covers to muffle her cries. She was consumed by pain and fear. Samuel, with Poppy for his last night at home, was leaving at dawn to move to the Anderson estate.

When she stopped crying, Mattie went down upon her knees to pray. “Please, Lord, please watch over my son tonight and all the nights to come. Take care o’ him for me. Make ’em treat him right, keep him warm and fed. Don’ let no harm come to him. Please, Lord, keep him safe.”

She stayed on her knees and repeated her prayer again and again. So intent on her petitions, Mattie neglected to fetch Lisbeth from the drawing room and eventually the girl was sent upstairs alone. Mattie did not acknowledge Lisbeth when she walked into the room or when Lisbeth knelt beside her with prayers of her own.

After a night of tossing and turning punctuated with fitful dreams, Mattie rose before the sun. She quietly made her way to the window by Lisbeth's bed. Staring out into the still dark morning she stood rigid, waiting for a last look at her son. Before the sun finished making its way over the horizon, a wagon pulled up. Samuel, followed by Poppy, walked out of his cabin and climbed into the wagon. Though he could not see her, he looked up at his mother, knowing she was there.

Mattie muffled a cry into one hand and waved through the cold, damp glass with the other. Dropping her hands to her sides, she stood stiff as a board as she watched her son being driven away, growing ever smaller in the distance until she could not make him out any more.

While standing there frozen, staring at an empty road, small, sticky fingers slipped into her hand.

Lisbeth's little girl voice broke into the horrible morning, "It is all right, Mattie. I will not leave you. You still have me."



With no other way to help her son, Mattie prayed for him as she went about her duties. Sometimes she spoke her prayers out loud, but mostly her petitions were spoken in her heart. Distracted and bereft, Mattie barely was able to care for Lisbeth's physical needs and paid little attention to her charge otherwise. Lisbeth, in a futile attempt to cheer up her nurse, took to the habit of sneaking up some dessert in her pocket. But Mattie did not eat it.

Samuel's Sunday visit did nothing to diminish Mattie's anxiety. In less than a week he had lost weight and gained a panicked look. He did not say much about his time at the Andersons', but it could not be good.

"I don' wanna go back," he pleaded to Mattie on Sunday evening. "Don' make me. Hide me here!"

"Samuel, that just gonna make things worse. Hold on for jus' a few more weeks," Mattie attempted to reassure him. "Then we gonna all be together."



On a bright March afternoon, nearly two weeks after Samuel's departure, Mattie was waiting in Lisbeth's room with their midday dinner when Lisbeth bounced in. Excitement shone in her eyes as she proudly proclaimed, "Mattie, come see! I found the first crocus. It is spring. I asked Cook to make us a picnic: cornbread and black beans! It will be ready soon."

Mattie snapped, "Lisbeth, I know you tryin' to make me feel better. But ain't no little flower gonna do it." Mattie's voice rose, "Ain't no little bits of your left-over dessert gonna make me feel better. I scared for my son, child. Ain't nothin' gonna make me feel better but to see him again."

Lisbeth's face fell.

More gently, Mattie went on, "Now you go on and have that picnic without me."

Lisbeth stared at Mattie, confused because her nurse had always loved the first picnic of spring, and then ran out of the room. Mattie considered going after her, but could not stir herself to action.

Mattie was not entirely surprised when Emily sought her out later that afternoon to tell her she was wanted in the drawing room. Someone must have seen that Lisbeth was upset because the child would not have complained to Mrs. Ann.

Mattie tapped gently on the drawing room door. The calm expression on her face belied the activity in her heart. She was never comfortable being called into Mrs. Ann's presence, though these meetings were typically short and to the point.

When she entered the room and saw both Mr. Wainwright and Mrs. Ann waiting to speak with her she feared the worst. She stood before them, eyes turned down, wiping her sweaty palms on her dress.

"Mattie, we have news from the Andersons'," Mrs. Ann stated. "It seems Samuel has disappeared. They want to know if you know anything about it."

Mattie's heart skipped a beat; blood rushed away from her head, making it impossible to focus on the words coming toward her. A hot, nauseous wave swept through her body. It was too soon! They were not supposed to leave for weeks yet!

"My baby," escaped from her lips.

Then she staggered, working to hold herself up while trying to make sense of the words coming out of Mrs. Ann's mouth as she continued to lecture Mattie.

Eventually Mr. Wainwright broke in loudly, "Mattie, answer the question. Do you know where Samuel is? Is he being hidden anywhere? He is too young to have gotten far on his own.

Apparently he has been gone for several days now."

"I don' know nothin' bout my son. Ask the Good Lord if you want to know where he at."

"Now Mattie, angry words are not called for. I am certain the Andersons made him welcome. They are good people. He did not give it enough time. It takes awhile to adjust to a new home."

Mattie had no response.

"They will want to speak with you directly. I will bring you over in the morning. Good night," declared Mr. Wainwright.



Early the next morning, Lisbeth stood in the doorway adjoining her room to Mattie's. She watched as Mattie pulled a clean dress over a crisp white slip. Mattie carefully and efficiently buttoned up the front of her bodice.

"Mattie, how long will you be gone?" Lisbeth inquired as Mattie adjusted her necklace.

"Don' know."

"But you will be home to eat dinner with me?" implored Lisbeth.

"Don' know."

"Oh, Mattie, I am scared for you."

"Ain't nothin' they can do gonna be worse than my son gone missin'," Mattie said, though horrible visions of whips, humiliation, and pain ran through her head.

Mattie fixed her hair in silence while Lisbeth watched.

"You missed some," Lisbeth pointed out as Mattie pulled her hair into a bun. Lisbeth reached up to put the stray lock into Mattie's hand.

"Thank you, honey," Mattie said.

She gave Lisbeth's hand a quick squeeze as she took the stray hair and then put it in its place. She turned to Lisbeth. Cupping Lisbeth's chin in her hand, Mattie tipped Lisbeth's head back until they were looking at each

other eye to eye. Staring at one another wordlessly, Mattie gave a small shake of her head, sighed, and pulled Lisbeth into a tight hug. Lisbeth clutched Mattie's warm body until Mattie pulled away. Mattie looked down at Lisbeth, their arms still wrapped around one another, and said, "I gonna be all right."

Mattie rubbed Lisbeth's soft cheek with her thumb, kissed the top of her head, and stepped back. "Now you get on," she told her.

Lisbeth watched Mattie's skirts disappear through the small back door. After a moment she crossed the room and opened the door to the dim hallway that led to the back staircase. She could no longer see Mattie, but she heard her steps echoing down the stairs. She counted, 1...2...3...up to 13, until she could no longer hear Mattie descending away from her.

Lisbeth, alone and scared, watched from the window as Father drove Mattie away. She went to her lessons in the drawing room but had difficulty paying attention to Bible passages and arithmetic tables. Most days she ate her midday meal with Mattie, but today she ate with Mother and Jack. Mother acted as if it were common for her to have dinner with her children, but Lisbeth did not go along with the pretense. She met Mother's inquiries with brief replies and obviously stared out the window looking for Mattie. Jack, on the other hand, happily shared every detail of his day, oblivious to the tension in the room.

While she tried to eat tasteless barley soup, Lisbeth heard the sound of wheels against gravel. She peered out the window again, but she could not get a good view of the road. Mother heard the sound too, but made no mention of it.

From the clamor in the entryway Lisbeth knew Father was home. But the sound of his footsteps retreating down the hall to the study dashed any hope of news from him. As quickly as possible, Lisbeth finished her meal and went to her rooms to find Mattie.

But she was not there. Lisbeth's heart fell when she did not find Mattie in either her large room or the small adjacent one. Although Lisbeth wanted to search for Mattie washing in the kitchen or ironing in the laundry, she did not go looking for her. Mattie would return to assist Lisbeth in getting ready for dinner. In the meantime, Lisbeth had to go with her mother to her lessons at the Cunninghams'.



The comportment teacher, Miss Taylor, had been teaching the daughters of plantation owners along the James River for as long as anyone remembered. Most ladies under the age of forty had been tutored by her. Etiquette, table manners, elocution, and dance were perfected under her tutelage. She transformed young girls, starting at the age of nine, into young ladies in order to facilitate the most advantageous marriage.

Lisbeth's twice-weekly lessons rotated on a monthly basis between the homes of the girls taking them. This gave all the mothers the ability to observe the lessons, see one another's homes, and play hostess for the women as they waited for their daughters. It also gave them the opportunity to assess their own daughter's standing in relationship to the other girls.

Lessons this month were at White Pines, the largest Tidewater estate east of Richmond. The Cunninghams had the distinction of being one of the older families and were thought to be the wealthiest in the area. Their daughter, Emma, ten years old like Lisbeth, was preparing for her debut in the same year. But of more interest to the debutante families was Emma's fourteen-year-old brother, Edward. As the eldest son he stood to inherit the entire family estate.

Miss Taylor started lessons with a meal course to impart table manners and proper use of cutlery. They needed to learn about all the courses of a meal, so they rotated which course was served at each lesson. All the girls agreed that the dessert course was their favorite lesson. Soup was the least favorite because there were so many opportunities to be scolded.

The meal portion of the lesson was followed by comportment.

"Young ladies may speak to young men about the weather, meals, clothing, and their relatives. Avoid conversation concerning politics, finance, or religion. Though a gentleman may bring up such topics, and a lady must follow where a gentleman leads, a skilled lady will return the conversation to an appropriate topic."

The girls feigned interest as Miss Taylor went on, "When speaking with a lady who is older than you, you must follow her lead. Occasionally, though, you will be required to initiate conversation. Fashion, the weather, and inquiries about relations are always appropriate topics among ladies. Do not allow a gentleman to overhear you speaking about courtship, literature, or politics."

With so many rules about what to say and what not to say, Lisbeth's head spun. Her mind drifted to Mattie as Miss Taylor gave instructions about speaking with elderly men. When they practiced their conversation skills, Lisbeth was paired with Camilla Anderson, who remarked loudly enough for all to hear, "Elizabeth, you must have misunderstood. A lady does not speak about relations with an older gentleman!"

Lisbeth was relieved to move on to dance and away from Camilla.

"Girls, line up across from your dance partner," Miss Taylor commanded. "Today we learn the Virginia Reel. As always, begin by honoring your partner."

The "ladies" curtsied as the "gentlemen" bowed.

"Miss Ford, that was a perfect curtsy. You all would be wise to follow Miss Ford's lead," Miss Taylor said. "Now, repeat after me, forward two steps, back two steps."

The girls chimed back, "Forward two steps, back two steps."

"Very good. Begin when I return to one. One, two, three, four. One..."

Miss Taylor plodded through the steps. In truth, she danced terribly with little sense of rhythm. But none of the parents cared; she served her purpose well, preparing their daughters for their debuts.

The girls would begin attending dances after their twelfth birthdays. Although eighteen or nineteen was the traditional debutante year—the year courting began in earnest—the early years on the dance circuit allowed the families of eligible young men plenty of time to observe the girls and make a decision about whom to invite into their families. Of course, in such a small community, they had been speculating for years about which matches might be made among the Tidewater plantations and which families might go beyond.

Lisbeth felt grateful Mary Ford was present at these lessons. Still as cooperative as she was as a young child, Mary paid close attention, so Lisbeth needed only to follow her cues. Although Mary never disrupted class, she happily joined Lisbeth afterward to complain about the arrogant Camilla Anderson or to laugh at the awkward Edith Framington.

"Mary, they took Mattie away today," Lisbeth whispered to her friend.

"Who took her? Where?"

"Father took her to the Andersons'. We sold Samuel to them, Mattie's son, and then he ran. They want her to tell them where he went."

"That explains Camilla's attitude toward you today."

“She does not need an excuse to be rude. I wish to know what will happen to Mattie, but I dare not ask. Mother had dinner with us today and pretended it was entirely common.”

“How long will she be gone?”

“I do not know. No one will tell me anything. I expect she will be home when I need her tonight.”

But Mattie was not waiting to dress Lisbeth for supper. Sullen Emily stood ready to assist Lisbeth. With her usually efficiency, Mrs. Gray had ensured all the functions of the household were filled properly, but no one provided answers to a young girl’s unspoken questions.

No answers came over supper or in the drawing room after supper. That night, as Lisbeth stared out the window, she said an extra-fervent prayer for her nurse. “Dear Lord, please watch over Mattie tonight and bring her home soon. And bless Mother, Father, Jack, and Grandmother. Amen.”

Over breakfast the next morning, Lisbeth finally asked Mother when to expect Mattie, but Mother only responded, “This is nothing you need be concerned about. We are handling this issue.”

Lisbeth did not raise the topic again.

Two days later, Lisbeth heard a wagon draw up to the back door. Lisbeth continued with her embroidery until it was time to get ready for supper. Wearing a calm mask, Lisbeth slowly climbed the wide, front stairs and walked down the hallway to her rooms. Mattie stood by the window waiting for her. A wave of relief rushed over Lisbeth. Mattie looked fine. Mattie was home.

“Did you find Samuel?” Lisbeth burst out. “I missed you. I worried so much, but no one told me what became of you. Is Samuel home now?” Lisbeth threw her arms around Mattie in an exuberant embrace. Mattie flinched the instant Lisbeth’s arms touched her back. Feeling the jerk of Mattie’s body, Lisbeth pulled away.

“What is the matter? Are you hurt?”

“They gave me some lashin’s. It sore.”

“But why? How could they?” Lisbeth gaped, entirely stunned. She never expected Mattie to return with wounds. Mother bragged that they did not whip slaves at Fair Oaks. She often stated that only cruel or undisciplined households required the lash.

“We have to tell Mother and Father what they did to you.”

“Child, they sure didn’ give me these without askin’ your father first. As to why, only God know why some folks think it okay to hurt others to get what they want. I gotta get you ready for supper on time or there gonna be more trouble for me.”

A lavish spread, made by the hands of slaves, covered the table: veal cutlets with mushroom catsup, beef steak pie, oyster soup, parsnips, young greens, wine, and apple pudding for dessert. Surrounding the table were the five well-dressed members of the Wainwright household and their four guests, Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham and their children, Edward and Emma.

“Did you get the little darky returned?” asked Mr. Cunningham.

“No. Turns out his buck ran away from Berkeley as well. They may have gotten quite far by now. They had a pass.”

“Where did they get such a thing?” exclaimed Mrs. Cunningham.

“Looks like some fool is teaching the niggers how to write!”

Fear rushed through Lisbeth. Her heart beat hard. She started to reach for her water, but her hand noticeably shook. Quickly she hid her hand in her skirt, looking around to see if anyone had noticed her nerves, but no one was paying any attention to her. Her parents did not suspect that she had taught Samuel to write. She could only imagine Father’s fury if he learned that she was responsible for Emmanuel and Samuel’s escape.

“It is such a shame,” Mother broke in. “We made certain he went to a good family and this is what happens. Mr. Anderson will never buy one of our darkies again.”

Grandmother Wainwright spoke up, “You know you are too lenient with them. Before you know it we will have lost them all.”

“Who have they got looking for them?” asked Mr. Cunningham.

“Ron Reynolds and Geoff Bloom. We want them returned alive and able to work.”

Alive. The word cut through Lisbeth. Alive! Father wanted them back *alive*. She considered the alternative. Samuel might be dead? Suddenly Lisbeth understood Mattie’s distress. She listened carefully to the adult conversation. Discussions about escaped slaves were as much a part of the ritual of Saturday dinner as grace, and she generally paid it about the same attention. It never seemed important before, but this mattered to her.



In the middle of the night, Lisbeth woke from a dream in a rush. Father had been pushing a whip into her hand, repeating, "It is for the best. It is for the best. You will see." As she lay in the dark, frightened and alone, her heart beat fast while tears seeped from the edges of her eyes. Then she did something she had not done since she was young: she sought out Mattie. Climbing out of her warm bed, she made her way to the small anteroom.

"Mattie?" Lisbeth whispered as she shivered over her nurse's form.

Half asleep, Mattie stirred and shifted to make room for Lisbeth. Her arms spread open to allow Lisbeth to snuggle in close. Lisbeth lay in the dark, held in Mattie's arms, rubbing the center shell in the hollow of Mattie's neck just as she had as a little girl. The warmth of Mattie's bed and body enveloped Lisbeth, driving away her demons. The familiar smell and feel worked their magic and lulled Lisbeth to sleep.

Chapter 12

Three days earlier

Mattie was terrified but didn't show it. Mr. Wainwright said only one thing on the ride over to the Andersons'. "Tell them what you know, Mattie. It will go easier for you... and for Samuel."

As soon as they arrived at the Anderson plantation, the overseer, a dark-haired white man, led Mattie away while Mr. Wainwright went in to speak with Mr. Anderson. He led her away from the grand house to an isolated cabin near the slave dwellings.

Pointing to a bench outside the lonely hut, the overseer growled, "I'll deal with you later."

Jeb Martin had been at the Anderson plantation for less than a year. He had learned what he knew of working with slaves from his father, who worked at the Williams plantation just seven miles east. The planters considered Mr. Martin to be the best overseer in the county because he got the most work out of his slaves without undue force. They encouraged their overseers to take after Mr. Martin, thus reinforcing their self-delusion that they were morally superior to the brutal owners in Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. As Jeb was growing up, Mr. Martin instructed him, "Treat your niggers halfway like a man and halfway like a beast and you'll do all right."

Jeb Martin desired to impress his father with his own skills, but now he had trouble. He hadn't wanted to take the Samuel boy in the first place. He didn't need a young buck, he needed a few more full-grown ones. But Mr. Anderson had insisted. Apparently he owed Mr. Wainwright some sort of favor. But now the owners blamed Jeb for the boy's running away.

Mattie was left to sit for hours without food or water as the sun rose higher and higher in the sky. She feared what was to come. Her lips moved in a silent litany of prayers, "Dear Lord, it me, Mattie. Please watch over

my son and make sure he all right. And dear Lord, if it not too much, give me the strength to make it through this day.”

In the middle of the day, Mattie saw Mr. Wainwright’s carriage drive away. A hot wave of fear washed over her, sucking away her breath. Her hands gripped the bench she sat on. She had been left behind.

As the sun descended toward the horizon, long shadows marked the earth like a stain. Just as Mattie felt some relief from the beating of the sun Jeb came to deal with her.

“In,” he said sharply as he pointed to the cabin door beside the bench. Mattie fumbled with the metal latch to open the door. The young overseer did not follow behind, but rather pulled the door firmly closed, leaving Mattie alone in the dark, empty cabin. She heard the sharp echo of metal against wood as the door locked behind her.

This space felt familiar, but somehow wrong. It was constructed like the Quarters at Fair Oak with walls made from unfinished split-logs and a dusty dirt floor. The eight-by-eight-foot square dwelling was entirely empty with no window openings. Bits of light shone through the cracks in the boards, illuminating the particles of dust floating like stars in the empty space. The hard-packed dirt floor had a tight, circular path worn in the middle made by the pacing of earlier occupants.

When Mattie’s eyes adjusted to the dark she noticed carvings and dark brown images on the walls. They were covered in stick figures, stars, animals, and abstract patterns. Mattie’s eyes snaked over a particularly compelling pattern of five circles surrounding a center circle that bordered the entire room snaking up and down across the boards. The artist must have taken days to complete it. She moved in closer to examine the image. A slow, painful realization crept over Mattie: fingers and blood had made these patterns. Images of cut flesh and severed limbs filled her mind. Fear washed through her body.

Mattie sank down onto the ground, curled up her body, pressed her eyes hard into her knees, and struggled to breathe. She rocked back and forth, mumbling a quiet prayer, asking for strength and faith. Hours later her prayers and dreams were interrupted by the kick of a well-worn black boot.

“Stand up.”

The light of the moon came through the open door, throwing Jeb Martin into silhouette. He towered over her as she struggled to awareness. Before

she managed to get herself up, he grabbed her arm and roughly pulled her up.

“Unbutton your dress.”

The acrid taste of fear filled Mattie’s mouth, a cold sweat sprang from her pores, and her heart pounded so loudly she could hear the swish, swish, swish of her own blood. She willed her arms to move, to do as the man staring at her asked, but they were frozen by her side.

“DO IT NOW!” he raged at her.

Large and imposing, his gaze bored into Mattie. She could not see, but rather felt the intensity of his stare. Reaching toward her neck with shaking hands, she clumsily unbound the buttons along her gown. An eternity passed getting each button to loosen from its noose. Jeb focused harder as she exposed more of her dark, shiny flesh in the moonlight. She heard the sounds of his deep breath and felt his exhalations on her clammy skin.

“Stop!” he yelled suddenly when she finished unbinding the button at her navel. “Turn around.”

She turned slowly. The instant Mattie faced the wall Jeb grabbed the neck of her gown and jerked it off her shoulders. Without a pause he quickly and proficiently lashed her three times, cutting into the skin at her shoulder blades. She cried out in pain. Tensing her shoulders in preparation for the next blows, frozen in fear in the dark room, she waited for what would come next. Her ears were filled with the frantic beating of her own heart so that no other sounds penetrated. The sweat ran down her back, stinging the freshly made cuts. She took in a shaky breath, steeling herself for his next attack.

Listening carefully for the sound of his breathing, she willed her heart to slow down to hear beyond it. She stood frozen. She dared a slight turn of her head. Nothing. She turned her head farther. Nothing. She turned around completely and saw that the room was empty. She was alone. A gasp of relief rushed from her body. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall to steady herself. Sharp pain forced her to jerk away from the boards. Turning to face the wall, she pressed her forehead against the boards as tears of relief and pain fell from her eyes.



Jeb walked away from the hut feeling proud. Though he wanted that nigger as much as he wanted anything in his life, he had walked away. Mr. Anderson had made it quite clear that she was to go home with no more than a few whip marks and certainly not with a child. This nigger was not his to do with as he pleased. He had controlled himself; he had done his job well. He looked forward to telling his father about it at Sunday supper. But for now he was making his way to the slave shanties to get a field hand to deal with his erection.



Mattie wedged herself into a corner of the shanty and leaned into the walls. Her mind reeled. He had not even asked her a question. Reaching to her shoulder, she touched the moisture on her back with her finger. She examined the crimson drops shimmering on her skin before she wiped it on the wall in front of her. In the dark she could barely make out the mark, but she knew it had stained the board. She worked steadily to complete her undertaking before her blood stopped flowing. Dipping into her blood more than a dozen times, going over the marks again and again, she added her name to the wall of pain: M-A-T-T-I-E. She had found a use for her lettering after all.



The morning after Mattie's return, a disoriented Lisbeth found herself in bed with Mattie deeply asleep next to her. Lisbeth gazed intently at the still form. Curled up on her left side, her head wrapped in a cotton scarf, Mattie's cheek rested against her arm protruding from a white gown. Lisbeth laid her pale arm alongside Mattie's dark one. The smooth skin on her young limb was in sharp contrast to the strong muscles, puckered scars, and rough calluses of Mattie's arm. Lisbeth's eyes followed the trail of Mattie's arm up to the white material of her gown bunched up near the shoulder. Spots of dried blood, dark and round, peppered the light fabric. Lisbeth shuddered in fear and anger.

Lisbeth sighed and carefully slipped out of bed. She was accustomed to being woken up by Mattie after a fire had been lit, the warm wash water fetched, and her clothes prepared. But today she decided to take care of these duties for herself.

She passed through the door that led to the backstairs, an unusual passageway, to fetch warmed water from the kitchen. Despite the fear running through her body, she approached Cook, the imposing, stern woman who scared Lisbeth.

“May I have the wash water please?” Lisbeth requested.

Cook scowled silently at Lisbeth without making a move.

“Mattie is sleeping,” Lisbeth explained timidly. “I am fetching the water today.”

Cook gave a quick nod and brought Lisbeth a bucket filled with warm water. She patted Lisbeth’s hand after she passed over the bucket.

“May I have some salve too?”

After another silent nod, Cook found the salve. Tears glistened in her eyes as she handed Lisbeth a remedy of pokeweed and lard.

Lisbeth tiptoed quietly up the creaky stairs, but Mattie was already awake. A tired smile passed over her face when she saw the salve in Lisbeth’s hand. Mattie reached out to take it, but Lisbeth shook her head.

“Let me put it on.”

Mattie sat on the edge of her bed with her gown around her waist. Tenderly Lisbeth spread the soothing balm on Mattie’s wounds. With the index finger on her right hand Lisbeth slowly traced each mark from top to bottom across Mattie’s back: nine neat slices in all, three from each night she had been gone. Despite her care, Lisbeth broke open the scabs in some places. Bright red blood stood in contrast to the dark brown crust, pale finger, and coffee brown back. When all the wounds had been covered, Lisbeth had blood on her hands. As she stood to examine her work, she wiped it into the fabric of her dress.

Chapter 13

Mattie was still exhausted two weeks later. She went about her chores as best as she could, but she lagged behind on her duties. Cook, Emily, and the other household workers picked up the slack in the laundry and kitchen. They all knew better than to let Mrs. Gray find out Mattie was not taking care of her responsibilities. In the evenings Lisbeth prepared herself for bed and in the mornings she left Mattie to sleep while she fetched wash water, lit the fire, and dressed herself.

Days passed into weeks before it dawned on Mattie that her exhaustion was not from her ordeal. Her monthly bleeding hadn't come for a while and her breasts were very tender. She was with child. It must have took during her last time with Emmanuel. She considered ending it. But then she realized: she wanted this child. Mattie wasn't going to give up this new life. She was going to have this baby and then, in a few years, take it to join Samuel and Emmanuel.

She waited as long as possible to share her news. Lisbeth was the first person she told out loud. As they were preparing for bed, Mattie said, "Lisbeth, I got some news. You know how I been so tired, well, it 'cus I gonna have a baby."

"A baby? You are too old!" Lisbeth laughed.

"Old?" Mattie exclaimed with feigned outrage. "Thirty ain't so old to be havin' a baby!"

"Do you think it will be a boy or a girl? Too bad Samuel will not get to meet the baby. I shall help you take care of it," Lisbeth exclaimed.

"Lisbeth honey, you know it don' work that way." Mattie shook her head. "Ain't no one gonna let me stay in here with a baby of my own."

"Where will you go? Will they sell you?" Lisbeth said, not hiding the distress in her voice.

"I 'magine they gonna send me back outside."

Lisbeth cried; fat, warm tears slid down her face. She could not help herself though she wanted to stop. Feeling foolish, she did not look at Mattie, but gazed instead at her clenched hands. "What will I do? Who will be with me? Who will take care of me?" She looked up at Mattie, saw tears in her nurse's eyes too, and cried harder.

"You gonna be fine, Lisbeth. You can come see me in the afternoons. Remember how I always have my momma's love in my heart. Well, you gonna always have my love in your heart to guide you. You a good person, Lisbeth. You gonna be all right."

The next morning Mattie told Mrs. Gray of her condition. By noon, Mrs. Gray had moved Mattie out to the Quarters and moved Skinny Emily into the room adjacent to Lisbeth's.

At supper, Mother commented on Lisbeth's puffy, red eyes. "Have you been crying, Elizabeth dear?" she inquired, genuinely concerned.

"No, Mother, I am fine, only tired, that is all," Lisbeth replied politely.

In bed that night, Lisbeth sang herself to sleep.

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby
Everybody's gone in the cotton and the corn
Didn't leave nobody but the baby*

In the early evening, the time tucked between tea and supper, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Lisbeth snuck in visits to Mattie. Like so many aspects of plantation life, these visits were a widely known secret.

On one of these visits when Mattie's swollen belly looked ripe as a watermelon ready to burst, Mattie asked Lisbeth for a favor. She was ready for this baby to come out, except for a name. She needed to have the name set or risk the overseer choosing a name of his liking.

"I got it down to a few," Mattie explained, "but I want to know if the name I pick is gonna be good for the eye as well as for the ear. Can you put them down for me?"

Using the end of a burnt stick, Lisbeth scratched out "Matthew", "Jeremiah", "Jordan", "Naomi", and "Aurelia" into the hearth as Mattie recited each one.

"Those are all nice names, Mattie."

"I like the look of that letter," Mattie pointed. "What that one called?"

“That is a ‘J.’ This one says Jeremiah. This one is Jordan.”

Mattie declared, “That good. Jeremiah if it a boy. Jordan for a girl.”



On a clear, crisp November evening in 1847, after a day of hard labor, Jordan arrived into the world. She was born in Mattie and Poppy’s small cabin on the same pallet Mattie had birthed and suckled Samuel nearly eleven years before. Rebecca caught the infant, cut her cord, and passed her to her mother’s eager arms. Mattie’s heart opened wider, making room for yet another child to love.

Mattie rested in bed with her daughter cradled in her arms, spent but so satisfied. Jordan was latched to Mattie’s breast, mastering the skills of sucking and swallowing. Whenever the infant stopped for too long, Mattie tickled Jordan’s chin to keep her going. Mattie’s heart filled with joy as she took in the beauty of this new miracle. A fierce swelling of protection rose in Mattie.

Gazing down at her daughter, she spoke quietly and clearly, “I ain’t never gonna let ’em take me away from you. Never. I promise you, I ain’t goin’ nowhere without you and you ain’t goin’ nowhere but with me. When you are big enough, baby girl, we joinin’ your father and your brother. We gonna be free.”



Mrs. Gray came into the breakfast room the next morning with an announcement. “The newest addition to the Quarters was born last night.”

“Mattie had her baby?” Lisbeth exclaimed. “What name did she choose? Is it a boy or a girl?”

Turning a disdainful gaze to Lisbeth, Mrs. Gray responded laconically, “I do not know.”

Lisbeth returned her attention to her soft-boiled egg, hiding the sting of embarrassment and fury at Mrs. Gray’s attitude.

That afternoon Lisbeth ran eagerly to Mattie’s cabin but grew nervous when she got to the door. Standing in the fading sunlight, Lisbeth hesitated to knock. She thought babies slept a lot, and new mothers too. Maybe Mattie did not want her to visit. Then she heard the infant mewling and Mattie cooing. They were not asleep. Timidly she knocked.

Rebecca opened the door and welcomed Lisbeth warmly.

"You can go closer," Rebecca directed when Lisbeth hung by the threshold. Slowly Lisbeth crossed the room, her eyes never straying from the tiny newborn. Mattie beamed at Lisbeth as the girl grinned in wonder at the small form in Mattie's arms.

"Look at the little fingernails. They are so sweet." Lisbeth pointed. "Is it a girl? Mother did not know."

"Uh huh," Mattie confirmed.

Lisbeth asked, "Did you pick Jordan for a name?"

Mattie nodded. "I really like the look of that one."

"Hello, Jordan, I am Lisbeth. It is nice to meet you."

"She glad to meet you too," Mattie smiled. "You can touch her."

Lisbeth gently felt the smooth skin on Jordan's hand, and she carefully stroked each tiny nail. "She is so soft."

"Uh huh. They got special cream in there that keep 'em so soft."

"Look," Lisbeth said. She showed Mattie the fabric clutched in her hand. "Mother said I may give this to you. It is my first quilt. I made it baby size. It is not so good, but Mother says I am getting better at my stitches."

"Thank you, Lisbeth." Mattie gave Lisbeth a careful hug with Jordan sandwiched between them, then she spread the quilt over the baby. "This gonna keep her nice and warm when it get cold out here. We gonna treasure this for always." Mattie continued, "What fine stitches you made. This some corn?"

"Yes! I wanted you to be able to tell. Mother thought the stitches were too sloppy. It is from the song. You know, *Everybody's gone in the cotton and the corn*," Lisbeth sang. Showing off other parts of the quilt, she pointed out, "Here is the cotton. And over here is a shoe. I could not make it red, though."

Mattie hummed the familiar lullaby.

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby*

Lisbeth joined in with the words...

*Your momma's gone away and your daddy's gone to stay
Didn't leave nobody but the baby*

followed by Rebecca...

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby
Everybody's gone in the cotton and the corn
Didn't leave nobody but the baby*

The three of them gathered around the new baby, singing loud and clear to welcome her to their world.

*You're a sweet little baby
You're a sweet little baby
Honey in the rock and the sugar don't stop
Gonna bring a bottle to the baby*

*Don't you weep pretty baby
Don't you weep pretty baby
She's long gone with the red shoes on
Gonna meet another lovin baby*

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby
You and me and the devil makes three
Don't need no other lovin baby*

*Go to sleepy little baby
Go to sleepy little baby
Come and lay your bones on the alabaster stones
And be my ever lovin bab*

Standing around this new life, singing with Mattie and Rebecca, Lisbeth felt as if she belonged.



Throughout the winter and into spring Lisbeth slipped away to visit Mattie and Jordan many times a week. Instead of reading under the willow tree she headed down to the edge of the fields in the afternoons. There she often found Grandma Washington tending to Jordan while Mattie worked the fields.

Grandma Washington had been born on an unknown date at Fair Oaks before the turn of the century. Although all the slaves called her Grandma Washington, she was not an actual grandmother. None of the babies that had come from her body had lived long enough to bear children of their own. The three children she had carried, Marie, Bernadette, and William, had been dead for decades. Marie died before she even took her first breath. Sweet, silly Bernadette succumbed to the high fever just before her fourth birthday. Her last child, headstrong William, died from a broken heart. When he was sixteen his love, Rachel, was sold to a nearby plantation. They ran away together with grand plans for a better life far away, but they did not get far. Their bodies were recovered downriver four days after they left.

Perched on Grandma Washington's lap, Jordan broke out in a grin and reached her arms out eagerly as soon as Lisbeth arrived. Lisbeth beamed back at the baby. Spending time with Jordan, caring for this little girl, was the best part of Lisbeth's life.

The old woman watched as the young woman held the baby close. Jordan's small hand patted Lisbeth's back.

"I declare. I ain't never seen nothin' like that," the old woman said with a shake of her gray-haired head. "A white girl huggin' on and carin' for a negro baby."

Chapter 14

APRIL 1849

Two weeks before Lisbeth's twelfth birthday, she sat with her family in the drawing room after dinner, stitching on her last piece of "practice" work before she began in earnest on her trousseau.

"Elizabeth, I have news. We know the date of your first dance. The Parkers have announced they will be hosting at Willowbrook on the first of May."

Lisbeth blurted out, "We only have a month to prepare. What shall I wear? Mother, I am so nervous!"

"Do not be silly, Elizabeth. We have known for quite some time you would begin attending dances this spring. You are well prepared to do what is expected of you. Your father and I are counting on you to make a marvelous impression. As for your dress, I have arranged for the seamstress to come here tomorrow to take measurements. Be prepared to choose a fabric and style."

"Mother, can Mattie come in to dress me on the day of the dance?"

"Elizabeth, it is sweet that you are still so attached to Mattie, but Emily will make you presentable for the dance. You were fortunate to have your mammy until you were so old. Most of us give up our nurses long before you did. Why, I was only four years old when my nurse was sold." Mother went on, "Mattie is like your old baby quilt: she was important to you when you were little, but you have outgrown her now. I hope we did not make a mistake in letting her stay with you so long."

"No, Mother. I understand. What color do you think I should wear?"

"Deep blue is my first choice, if the seamstress has one. Such an elegant color will accentuate your eyes and make your skin appear to be fair. I can tell you have not been wearing your hat when you go out of doors."

"I will now. I promise. I want to be as beautiful as I can for the dance."

Mother corrected her, "Focus on bearing, and beauty will follow. Your looks will not remain with you for life. But your bearing will go with you to the grave, Elizabeth."

"Yes, Mother," Lisbeth agreed with her mouth but not her heart.



The seamstress carried a red and beige carpetbag bulging with swatches of fabric and patterns of dresses into the drawing room. Lisbeth watched eagerly as small rectangles of material were pulled out and sorted by material and color. Bright blues were followed by paler blues transforming into deep and pale greens, then reds, yellows, and, finally, boring white, black, and brown. She yearned to touch the smooth silks, but did not dare take such a liberty.

Mother had no such hesitation and fingered each of the fabrics in turn, inquiring about the cost and content when she found one she might choose.

"Printed cotton is quite in style for the young ones this year," the seamstress informed them. "These ones are twenty-four cents a yard, and these are twenty-eight cents per yard."

"They are lovely, but I prefer something more elegant for Elizabeth. Have you taken the order for Camilla Anderson?" asked Mother.

"Yes. They chose this silk chiffon in a pale yellow," the seamstress pointed out the fabric.

Mother fingered it idly. "How much is the silk?"

"The domestic chiffon is eighty-eight cents and the imported is one dollar per yard."

"This is terribly thin. She would have to be very careful not to tear it. Elizabeth, can you manage that?"

"Absolutely, Mother. It is very lovely," Lisbeth enthused. "I would be very happy in a gown from this material."

The seamstress suggested, "This taffeta is heavier and only slightly more expensive than the domestic chiffon at ninety-two cents per yard."

Lisbeth reached out to touch the material. "Oh Mother, this is so lovely!" Lisbeth dared not say more. She watched as Mother made social as well as financial calculations.

The seamstress broke the silence. "If you prefer, this linen, which has a heavy texture and will wear well, is fifty-five cents a yard. However, your

color choices will be limited.”

“No. We shall go with the silk taffeta. In the deep blue, I believe. What do you think, Elizabeth?”

“Oh, thank you, Mother!” Lisbeth beamed. “Yes, I am very fond of the blue. I promise I shall take very good care of it.”

Mother smiled in approval at Lisbeth.

“Show me your patterns,” instructed Mother.

“This is the one the Andersons chose,” the seamstress explained, pulling out a drawing. The fabric puffed out over a full-length hoop skirt. The hem of the gown was gathered into a series of scalloped rows tied by large bows.

“No. That is too frilly,” Mother declared. “I want something more elegant. What did the Cunninghams choose for Emma?”

“I will be taking their order tomorrow.”

“That is unfortunate,” Mother murmured under her breath.

Mother sorted through the patterns. All the gowns had fashionable hoop skirts and tight bodices. She rejected any dresses with long sleeves and high necklines as unsuitable for an evening event.

“Elizabeth, do you care for either of these?” Mother asked, holding out two drawings.

“I like them both. But this one is more lovely, in my opinion.” Lisbeth pointed to the pattern with a single row of shallow scallops across the bottom.

“That is fine,” Mother agreed. “We will have this one with the light blue silk chiffon as the underskirt. If Emma Cunningham’s dress will take away from or conflict with Elizabeth’s, please let me know and we will revise our order.”

“Of course, Ma’am. I will inform you right away if that is the case,” replied the seamstress.

Lisbeth slowly reached out a hand to lovingly stroke the blue silk taffeta. It was soft and smooth, so beautiful. Excited, she thanked Mother once again. “This is so lovely! I am very excited. Thank you, Mother!”

“I trust you will make us proud, Elizabeth. We are going to quite an expense so that you may make a good first impression.”

“I will, Mother. I will make you so very proud of me.”



Lisbeth burst into Mattie's cabin, too excited to contain herself. After settling on a chair with Jordan on her lap she spoke in a rush, "Mattie, my first dance will be in three weeks. I am frightened. Mother says I am prepared, but I am still nervous. We have asked the seamstress to make a gown in deep blue. It is almost exactly the shade of my eyes. I hope I will look beautiful. Mother says beauty is not as important as bearing. But I so want to be beautiful.

"Mother says we will not know the song list until the week before. And even then they may change it. I must be prepared for anything. Oh, I shall die if they play a Cumberland Reel. I am not so good at the Cumberland. But a waltz or the Virginia Reel, those I can do very well. So Mary tells me.

"How do you think I should wear my hair? It cannot be all the way up because I have not had my debut yet—not until I am nineteen as you know, but still I want it to be elegant. I am trying to decide between sweeping up the front and pulling it all back or simply pulling back the sides. What do you think, Mattie? Do I look better like this...or like this...?"

Mattie replied gruffly, "I don' care how you do your hair, Lisbeth. It just fine either way."

Shocked at Mattie's callousness, Lisbeth exclaimed, "How can you say that? This dance is extremely important. Mother says your first dance sets the stage for the rest of your life. It has to be perfect. My entire future depends upon it."

Mattie sighed, "Ain't nothin' ever perfect and it hard to believe one dance can change your life."

"Well, it is important. You do not even care, do you? How can you be so selfish?"

"Lisbeth, I just worked from sun-up to sundown in the fields after bein' up all night with Jordan. Jordan weak from havin' the runs for five days. Wanna know what I care about? I care about my daughter gettin' better."

Lisbeth rolled her eyes. "Then give her some salt water with sugar like you served me when I was ill. She will become better soon enough."

"I ain't got no salt and I ain't got no sugar. How I gonna give my daughter what I don' got?" Mattie stared at Lisbeth.

"Oh," said Lisbeth, instantly deflated. Then, for the first time since walking in the door, she looked carefully at the child resting against her body. Through the dusky light, Lisbeth made out dark circles under the little girl's sunken eyes. Jordan was nearly motionless. Jordan was extremely ill

and Lisbeth had not noticed. Stunned into silence, Lisbeth felt deeply ashamed.

“Oh, Mattie, I am sorry. Cook will give me sugar and salt if I tell her I have the runs. I shall bring it to you.”

True to her word, later that night Lisbeth snuck down the rear stairs to deliver the elixir that Jordan desperately needed.



“Mattie, the evening was simply awful,” Lisbeth reported after greeting Mattie and kissing Jordan. “I cannot believe I have wanted to attend those dances for years. I hated it. Everyone behaved so cruelly. I missed my last dance because nasty Camilla Anderson spilled punch on my dress. She did it on purpose, I am certain, although Mother says a lady never does such a thing. Camilla Anderson is no lady, I tell you. She gave me cruel looks from the moment I walked into Willowbrook. I think she still holds it against us because Samuel ran away. I do not blame him one bit. They must be an awful family to have such a daughter.

“First I danced with Matthew Johnson. Matthew behaved very kindly and gentlemanly throughout the entire dance. It was a waltz, so I know I did not embarrass myself. He has lovely hazel green eyes, but Mother says I need not concern myself with Matthew’s eyes. His family has only ten acres and three slaves. Mother says they are ‘not in our league and are practically abolitionists’ although she thought it fine for me to dance with him once as a kindness. As she likes to say, ‘It is always proper to show generosity to our inferiors.’ I am glad that I shall be allowed to dance with him because truly he is the most pleasant dance partner.

“Next I danced with Nathaniel Jackson, who has horrid breath. I turned my head to avoid the stench. You can imagine how difficult it is to dance whilst trying to avoid inhaling. After Nathaniel, I was partnered with William Anderson, Camilla’s brother, who could not dance at all, I tell you. He pulled me entirely too close and stepped on my toes on more than one occasion. As a lady, I had to pretend not to notice. It is difficult to stay quiet with a smile on your face when a large, clumsy buffoon smashes your foot. But I behaved as a lady should.

“My last dance, the Virginia Reel, which was not meant to be my last, started with Robert Ford, Mary’s brother. He is entertaining. Robert is very

accomplished in mimicking the adults. He did a perfect Mister Anderson, which made me laugh out loud, but I do not think he was bothered. In fact, I think he was pleased I found him so amusing.

“Then while I was waiting for my next dance, Camilla pretended to trip, spilling her glass of punch as well as mine all over my gorgeous blue gown. It was so beautiful. And if I do say so myself, I looked lovely in it. And now it is ruined due to Camilla’s cruelty. I am certain that she did not want me to dance with Edward Cunningham. She already had her dance with him. I do not think she wanted me, or anyone else, to have time with him. Mother says he is going to make the best marriage in the valley. After the incident he attended to me, which I believe made Camilla even more cross. But he did not dare to dance with me so as to not ruin his suit. Instead we sat together, but I was so furious I could not steer the conversation in an amusing or delightful direction.”

The young woman asked, “Mattie, do you think I have ruined my chance at the best marriage on the river?”

“Lisbeth, I can’ say much ’bout marriage. I know a good man make life more sweet. Someone to hold you and love you, someone to share your dreams with, someone kind and thoughtful. A good man’s a treasure.”

“Oh, Mattie, I am sorry. I am being thoughtless again. You must miss Emmanuel very much. It has been two years since he left, has it not? Do you think about him and Samuel often?”

Mattie replied, “Ev’ry day. I pray to God for them ev’ry day.”

Tentatively Lisbeth asked, “Have you heard from them at all? Do you know if they are safe?”

Mattie shook her head. “Miss Lisbeth, you know I can’ answer such a question. They in God’s hands, just leave it at that. You don’ want to be knowin’ any more. It ain’t safe for neither of us to know more ’en that.” Mattie paused. She looked at Lisbeth carefully. She sighed and went on, “’Nuff about that. Tell me more about the dance. You say you had no fun at all? What about Mary?”

“Mother allowed no talk with Mary at all! She ordered me to fetch tea and food to all the old ladies, except for during my times to dance. Then I was to be on the floor for everyone to watch. It was awful having all those eyes on me waiting for me to make a mistake. I cannot believe I have to do this for years to come.”

“You can always say no to the dances.”

“Oh, no, I cannot!” Lisbeth said emphatically. “Father and Mother will not let me forgo the season. They have been preparing me for this for years. I shall be fortunate if they allow me to miss some of the dances at lesser estates.”

Chapter 15

Several weeks after the dance, Lisbeth ventured down to the fields to visit with Jordan, but she was not with Grandma Washington. “She ain’t been here all day,” the old woman informed Lisbeth. “Don’t know why. Go looky in their cabin. Maybe she sick.”

Lisbeth trotted up the dirt path to Mattie’s cabin, but it was empty. Lisbeth resisted rushing down to the fields to check for them. Instead she waited on the benches behind the cabin. Lisbeth stared up at the back of her home. She tried to see inside, but the windows reflected all light. Patiently she waited for Mattie and Jordan.

Soon folks started returning from the fields. Lisbeth did not see Mattie, but she recognized Rebecca’s distinctive limp far down the path. She rushed to Rebecca’s cabin, where she was waiting when Rebecca came near. Rebecca stopped walking the instant she saw Lisbeth. Staring at the young mistress, she shook her head.

“Didn’ expect you so soon,” she said. “Come on in. I got somethin’ for you.” Rebecca’s eyes were moist. Tension filled her shoulders as they entered her cabin. Rebecca closed the door tight.

In a hoarse voice Rebecca whispered into the girl’s ear, “Lisbeth, Mattie left this for you.” Pulling a single shell on a string from her pocket, she uncurled Lisbeth’s fingers and placed it in her hand.

Lisbeth felt the shell and knew it at once. A chill traveled down her spine. “Where is Mattie?” Lisbeth screeched. “Where is Jordan?”

“Shh!” Rebecca rebuked. “Honey, they gone. Mattie gone to be with Emmanuel and Samuel.”

“But...? Where...? Why...?” Lisbeth formed incomplete questions. Blinking, she tried to comprehend Rebecca’s words. A sharp arrow stabbed through her heart. Rebecca’s deep brown eyes mirrored the panic and confusion Lisbeth felt.

“Mattie trusts you. No one know she gone,” Rebecca whispered fiercely. “Don’ go tellin’ no one, promise?”

“Where did they go? Will they be all right? Will we ever see them again?”

Rebecca shrugged. “They in God’s hands now. Mattie strong and smart. If anyone gonna make it, she gonna. I pray we ain’t gonna see them again. She gonna be in big trouble if she caught.”

“But...but...how could...? Where did...?”

Rebecca shook her head. “There nothing else for me to tell you. You gotta keep this quiet. Promise?”

Lisbeth agreed before she flew out of Rebecca’s cabin. She ran and ran, fast and far, running past the fields along the bank of the river until she collapsed in a heap on the ground. Her body heaved with sobs, and tears streamed down her face. They were gone. Just gone. They did not say goodbye. How could Mattie leave her? She did not even say goodbye!

She clutched the shell tight in her hand. In a fury she flung it into the tall grass in front of her. Her eyes followed the arc of the shell. The moment it left her hand regret flooded through her. She crawled after it, into the grass. She desperately pushed aside the green stems. Tears poured from her eyes. Sharp blades cut her hands until they bled. Her fingers became red and swollen from pushing aside the grass. After nearly an hour, long after her tears had dried up, she found it. Relieved, she collapsed to the ground and clutched the shell and string to her chest. Then she ran inside to get ready for supper before her parents realized she was missing too.



Two nights before

Mattie lay in bed with her mind racing, going over every last detail. Jordan, drugged with valerian root, slept soundly next to her. Dried meat and a bladder of water were packed away with other essentials in an old burlap seed sack tied shut with heavy twine. Stolen boots sat under the cot waiting for Mattie to fit her feet into them and escape. Only three things were left to do: pray to God, say her goodbyes, and head out.

“Dear God, please watch over us tonight. Keep us safe and guide us to freedom. I promise once we there we gonna help other folks get they freedom too. Thank you, Lord. Amen.”

Her grandfather tied Jordan tightly against Mattie's torso with a heavy cloth.

Poppy whispered, "You go hard, girl, and don' look back. You strong, you can do this. Emmanuel got you a good home in Ohio. You gonna make it." His voice broke, but he looked straight into her eyes. "I don' ever want to see you again, you hear me? You gonna be free. Your family the first ones of us that got away. You makin' me proud."

Blinking the tears from her eyes, Mattie gave him a hug to last a lifetime and left. Quietly making her way to Rebecca's cabin, she worked the latch without knocking and slowly opened the creaky door. Rebecca was sitting up, waiting for Mattie, ready for their goodbye.

"I gonna miss you so much," Mattie said. "You gotta come some day. All of you."

Tears streamed down her cheeks as Rebecca whispered, "Mattie, I ain't got it in me, but you do. You gonna make it. Here you go."

Rebecca handed Mattie traveling papers written in Sarah's distinct handwriting. Mattie had given up a portion of her rations for six months to trade for the paper and ink necessary to create this ticket to freedom. They declared that "the bearer of these papers, Georgia Freedman, a free African, is traveling to Clarksburg, Virginia, to visit her kin." Mattie folded the forged document carefully and squirreled it in the bodice of her dress.

"Can you do somethin' for me?" Mattie asked as she pulled a black string out of her bodice. On the end dangled one of the shells from her necklace. "Give this to Lisbeth, okay?" Mattie whispered. "She ain't gonna understand why I gotta leave her. You help her, 'kay." Mattie's tears flowed freely.

The two women embraced tightly. Rebecca whispered into Mattie's ear, "I gonna pray for you every night. For always." As they pulled apart, Rebecca looked intently at Mattie and spoke emphatically, "You get word to us you made it, promise?"

"Promise," Mattie confirmed. "Goodbye."

"Bye."

Without a backward glance, Mattie journeyed away from her home toward freedom, leaving behind the bones of generations of her ancestors and their captors.



Dinner was excruciating for Lisbeth. Neither Mother nor Father spoke of any runaways, so clearly they did not know Mattie was missing. Doing her best to hide her sorrow and anxiety, she answered their queries with the explanation that she had a headache. It was not a falsehood. She had cried so much in the afternoon that she had given herself a headache. Lisbeth felt great relief when Father excused her from the ritual of gathering in the drawing room and sent her to bed early.

Kneeling by her bed for her nightly prayers, Lisbeth whispered to God, "Please, God, make Mattie change her mind and return. No one knows she is gone yet so she will not be in trouble. Tell her I want her back. Amen. Oh, and bless Mattie, Jordan, Mother, Father, Grandmother, and Jack. Amen."

Lying in bed, her head on her soft pillow, Lisbeth clutched the shell necklace tightly in her right hand. She quietly sang to herself, *Go to sleepy little baby, Go to sleepy little baby*, as she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning Lisbeth sat in the rocker and gazed out the window by her bed, hoping desperately that Mattie had returned in the night. When the door to Mattie's cabin opened at the customary time, Lisbeth stood to get a better view. Poppy came out, all alone, looking more stooped than ever as he made his way to his work. No Mattie. No Jordan.

In the breakfast room Mother spoke privately to Lisbeth. "Lisbeth, I have sad news."

"What is it, Mother?" Lisbeth asked nervously, extremely conscious of the shell necklace in her pocket.

"Mattie is missing. We fear she has run away. I do not know what she is thinking, taking that baby away from her safe home to go into the woods and heaven knows where. Your father is confident she will be found, but we thought you should know. I know you are quite fond of her. However, it shows you what I have explained before. You cannot trust any of them no matter how well you think you may know them."

"Yes, Mother. Thank you for telling me," Lisbeth said, keeping her voice as neutral as possible. "I will pray for them."

"Yes, we must all pray for their return."

Lisbeth nodded, though she did not share her mother's certainty about what to pray for.



Stumbling west through the underbrush in the forest, Mattie made it to Herring Creek in two hours. The heavy boots protected her feet as she waded through the stream for a mile before getting out on the western bank, but soon she felt blisters rise on her heels and ankles. Ignoring the pain, she trudged through a forest of cedars, cottonwoods, and river birches for another mile, then backtracked to the stream, headed two miles north, then west in a crooked path through the dense forest until sunrise. Climbing into the branches of a sycamore tree, Mattie breastfed Jordan before dosing her again with valerian root, and then she waited. Waiting was a hard but very essential part of this journey. Internally Mattie sang, prayed, and imagined. She pictured herself holding Samuel. She thought of the home Emmanuel had waiting. She practiced introducing Jordan to her father and brother. She did everything but think about getting caught. And when images of being captured intruded upon her mind, she quickly pushed them away. The day passed slowly, and they set out again at nightfall.

And so they went, heading north and west. By night Mattie walked, by day she hid in trees, bushes, caves—any shelter where she could imagine they were safe. Mattie's dried meat and hard tack ran out after five days, so she foraged bits of food from the forest—elderberries, gooseberries, paw paws, black walnuts. It was just enough to keep up her milk for Jordan.

After seven days, she came upon a dirt road in the midst of the trees. Using the stars as a guide, she followed the road north, staying hidden in the brush, until she came to an intersection. Though it was the middle of the night, she moved more deeply into the forest searching for a cave marked by a faint charcoal star. After finding it, she settled in and waited for what was to come next.

Chapter 16

Lisbeth went through each day in a fog. It was hard to concentrate on her studies. At dance lessons, she acted terribly, even to Mary. She was disoriented without the anchor to her life. Each morning and evening she stared out the window looking for a sign of them. She longed for Mattie's return, but even more she yearned to know her Mattie and her Jordan were safe. Desperate for news, she sought out Rebecca for information.

"Rebecca, you will tell me if you hear from Mattie?" Lisbeth implored.

"Lisbeth, if we hear they safe in Ohio it not gonna be for a long, long time," Rebecca explained. "If they caught and brought back, you probably gonna know as soon as I do."

Hope rustled in Lisbeth's heart. "Do you think it is possible they will come back?"

"If that happen, they gonna be paraded in front of everyone before they sold South."

"Sold?!" Lisbeth exclaimed.

"Yeah, sold. To Alabama or Georgia. She ain't gonna get a second chance." Rebecca's voice caught. "They gone from here for good."

"No, that is not true!" Lisbeth insisted. "I will ask Mother and Father. I can get Mattie to promise to never leave again. They will believe me!"

Rebecca shook her head in disbelief, but did not argue with the young mistress of the plantation.



Before the sun had fully risen, Mattie heard the low call of an owl. She returned the call. It came back doubled. She responded in kind. After the third call, she came out of her cave to look at the road. A tired old horse, hardly more than skin and bones, with open sores on its dirty white hair,

was harnessed to a creaky wagon. Driving the hay-filled wagon was a middle-aged white man. Small, with narrow eyes and pockmarked skin, he did not look at Mattie as she and Jordan emerged from the forest.

“Hello, I—” Mattie began.

“Don’t need to know who you are. Just give me your papers and climb in.”

“Yes, sir,” Mattie replied, following his directions. Then they drove west down the road in utter silence.

Hours later, when the sun was low in the horizon, the driver called out, “Here comes some folks.”

Quickly Mattie dug a hollow in the straw, placed her drugged child in it, and covered Jordan over with hay. The sounds of hooves echoed closer, closer, closer, and then passed. Mattie breathed a sigh of relief, then her heart raced as the horsemen doubled back, circled around the end of the wagon, and crossed to the front, blocking the way down the road. “Looky, looky, looky! What do we have here?” exclaimed the large, mustached man on the left. “Looks like you be transporting a nigger along with your hay.”

Wiping sweat from his red brow, the driver nervously responded, “I don’t want no trouble. I got her papers right here. She paid me good money. I ain’t looking for no trouble. Just making an honest dollar.”

“Well, I’m the local law, and my job is to make sure everything is legal,” replied the sheriff. “Let me jus’ take a look at those papers.”

After examining the papers carefully, he rode over to Mattie. “Hey, Vern,” he shouted to his deputy, “you got that list of local runaways? Let see if she matches any of ’em.”

The deputy dug the list out of his bag. “Looks like only two women are taking their chances: Mattie Wainwright and Rose Cuthbert. Can you imagine, Vern? A nigger named Rose? Hah!” Turning to Mattie, he yelled, “Get your ass out of that wagon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Clammy with sweat and shaking all over, Mattie turned around to climb down from the wagon. With her back to the authorities, she slipped a bit of wild ipecac plant into her mouth and swallowed it.

Sheriff Lucas dismounted his horse. He came close, flickered his eyes up and down Mattie’s body and drawled out, “Do you fancy yourself a Rose? No, I guess’n not, you are too old to be her. But Miissss Maaatie, now that might be you.” Moving in so close that flecks of his spit hit Mattie he went

on, "Says here this Mattie has herself a pick-a-ninny, but I suppose you might have killed it just so's you could get clean away. Ain't that right? No telling what a nigger will do to her own young. Don't have the same motherly feelings as a lady now, do you?"

Looking at his mate, he asked, "What do you think, Vern? Do you think..." he looked at the papers the driver had given him. "Is 'Georgia Freedman' Mattie Wainwright? Let's take a closer look."

Back in Mattie's face, he asked, "What brings a 'free' nigger to these parts?"

"My momma been sick, sir. I went to visit afore she died. She got the ague," Mattie barely stammered out through a dry mouth.

"Well, ain't that sweet," he replied, a smirk on his face, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You wanted to see your momma afore she dies."

Vern broke in, "She don't look so good herself, Lucas. I'd stand away if I were you."

"She just scared of getting her neck in a noose." He stuck his tongue out, disdain in his eyes, as he mimicked being hung.

Mattie shook hard, then suddenly heaved. In an instant, a gush of vomit erupted from the depth of her stomach. The men jumped back, disgust on both faces. A horrid stench rose up. Mattie fell to her knees in front of the law officers, expelling the limited contents of her stomach. Vern gagged. Continuing to retch, Mattie emptied her stomach of its bile. With nothing left to vomit, dry heaves violently wracked her body.

Rushing to the side of the road, Vern leaned over the grass to throw up bits of beans from his dinner.

"Looks like maybe you got the ague too," Sheriff Lucas declared, staring down at Mattie with no compassion in his eyes. Looking at the driver he declared, "I reckon you should just leave her here. Don't want a dead nigger on your hands now, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Okay, then, get on. We gonna take care of her."

"Yes, sir," the driver replied, signaling his horse to move on.

Horried, Mattie watched as the wagon drove away with Jordan. Shivering and sweaty, she held back screams of protest. Instead she lay curled in a ball while tears of frustration and fear seeped from the corners of her eyes.

Vern returned to peer down at Mattie. Specks of vomit mottled her dress, her skin glistened with moisture, and she shook hard all over like she had a fever. Vern asked, "What we gonna do with her? No reward is worth touching that for! Suppose she ain't even that Mattie?"

"We ain't gonna touch her, fool." Scorn was in the sheriff's voice. "We just gonna leave her here to die. If she's a free nigger, we don't want her thinking she can just come and go from Virginia as she pleases. If she's a runaway, she gonna get hung anyway. No need for us to mess up our clothes getting her anywheres else. Let's go."

They mounted up and rode off, taking Mattie's travel papers and leaving Mattie huddled on the dirt road.



With the sun behind the horizon, dusk soon turned into complete dark. Mattie wanted to move, willed her body to crawl down the road toward her daughter, but she could not. Every ounce of energy had been drained from her body. She lay there sick and helpless. Entirely spent, she was too weak even to shoo the flies off her gown. She feared she might fulfill the sheriff's desire and die in the night.

But she had the strength to pray, "Dear God, I sorry I runned. I shoulda stayed home, but I only wanted to see my son. I want my baby safe. Please, God. Let me see my baby again. She need me, God. You know she does. Please God, have mercy on her. Have mercy on me."

Shivering, parched, and fevered Mattie prayed, dozed, and dreamed of her daughter. Screams. Desperate toddler cries of "Momma, Momma, Momma" filled Mattie's dream world. Tears streamed from her closed eyes. She woke with a start, rubbed the moisture from her eyes, the dream still so present she heard the echo of faint cries.

In the pitch black, nearly moonless night, Mattie heard the faint crunch of wagon wheels. "Please, God, let him be coming for me. Please, Lord. Please, Lord. Please, Lord," she begged.

Mattie listened hard. This was not a dream. Sounds from a wagon drew louder and louder. "Please let it be him, Lord. Let it be him with my Jordan."

She stared hard at the darkness until she made out first the old horse and then the familiar face of the driver. He had come back. The driver steered

the horse past her, bringing the rear of the wagon next to Mattie.

The driver flew over to Mattie, "Are you all right? I hated to leave you, but I had to go. I couldn't take the chance."

"My baby!" Mattie croaked out weakly.

"I left her at the next house. She cried too loud when she woke up. Are you all right?"

"I all right now that you back. I ate some poison plants. I figured they gonna leave me alone if I got sick all over. I didn' count on them sendin' you away too."

Mattie tried to sit up, but her body shook too hard and her arms did not support her weight. Tenderly the driver helped her up and into the wagon.

Before the sun rose again, the driver turned into a small, well-kept farm. He pulled behind the white clapboard house and came to a stop by a door in the earth that led to a cellar. Pointing to the door in the ground, he said, "You wait in there till someone else comes for you."

Mattie replied, "Thank you...Uh, I don' even know your name?"

"Better that way. Keeps us all safer. Best of luck to you and your little girl. God bless you."

"God bless you, sir."



Mattie's weak arm shook as she pulled open the whitewashed door. Jordan stood frozen in the center of a damp, dark cellar. She was alone. She looked awful. Terror shone in her deep brown eyes and her face glistened with a thick coat of mucus, sweat, and tears. Her small body shook violently.

Mattie squeaked out to her daughter, "Momma's right here, baby girl. I back. You all right now."

Still weak from the ipecac, Mattie cautiously climbed down the steep staircase. As soon as Mattie got into the cellar Jordan threw her body against Mattie's legs. Shaking uncontrollably and gasping for breath, spasms wracked Jordan's small body. Desperately she clung to Mattie, burying her face into her chest, whimpering in a hoarse voice, "Momma, Momma, Momma."

Mattie held Jordan tight as a clamp, moisture streaming down her face. "Sorry, baby. I so sorry. You musta been so scared. So sorry. I jus' had to do

it. We gonna be free. We are. And it gonna be worth it. It gonna be worth it. Some day, it gonna be worth all this.”

Jordan clung tight to her mother through the entire night.



Mattie and Jordan stayed in the small, dark quarters alone for two days. Hard tack, boiled eggs, and water, delivered in the dead of the night, sat inside the door each morning when they awoke. Then in the middle of the night of the third day they were transported to a new farm as the sun rose. Before the door to this cellar closed, Mattie caught a glimpse of the four figures already present in the cramped room: a skinny young woman, a boy who looked to be about six years old or so, a tall, dark man missing his left ear, and a woman so old she only had one skinny tooth left sticking up from her bottom jaw. Mattie never did learn their names as the man glared Mattie into silence when she went to tell him hers.

The skinny young woman, not once looking at either Mattie or Jordan, occupied herself by biting tiny bits of her nails over and over, spitting the small fragments of her body onto the dirt floor. The frail woman hummed lullabies until the man told her to “hush up!” in a fierce whisper. Every few minutes she would begin humming again and he would repeat the hushing. The boy, cowering in the corner, watched it all in silence.

In the middle of the night, Mattie awoke to the screams of the old woman. “They gonna get me! They gonna get me!” she cried out as she clawed at the closed door.

“Shut up, old woman!” roared the man before slapping her hard to the ground.

He towered over the nail biter.

“We got to bring her, you say!” he yelled. “I ain’t going without her, you say! I shoulda left you all behind! We all gonna get caught ’cus of her. She gonna get me killed with all her carrying on. Don’ she know we got to be quiet?”

He paced in circles like a caged jaguar, mumbling to himself, “Gonna get me killed. We in danger. This the real thing. I the one they gonna kill. You all only gonna lose an ear or get a whippin’ or get sold to Alabama, but me, they gonna kill me. They gonna kill me! But before they do they gonna chop off my balls and shove ’em down my throat. I shoulda left you all.”

Wedge into their own corner, Mattie clutched Jordan close, silently watching the drama.



Food appeared at irregular intervals, as did other escapees. No words were passed among any of the strangers. On the third night, the cellar dwellers continued on their journey to the next safe house. They stayed there for only one day before they moved on to the next station. Weeks passed with the group traveling most nights and hiding during the day in a cellar, basement, or attic. Each night Mattie closed her prayers with a request that the old woman sleep through the night. Occasionally God answered “yes.”

One night, while they were being transported by wagon, the driver woke his passengers. They quickly came to attention, ready to take flight if necessary. As they rolled along the driver pointed, “Up ahead. It’s the Ohio River. You cross and you in a free state.”

They stared ahead, barely making out the dark snake of river in the black night. When they pulled up to the water’s edge, Mattie could not believe its size. She had never seen such a river before. It was wide and foreboding, ready to swallow them up.

The driver called out, and a man dragged a small boat from the bushes by the water. They climbed down from the wagon and were organized into groups for the crossing. Mattie and Jordan were assigned to go first. Shivering with equal parts fear and excitement, Mattie eyed the vessel that would take her to the other side. As she stepped in, the boat rocked, knocking her off balance. Stumbling, she nearly dropped Jordan into the churning water. She sat frozen on the wooden bench with Jordan clutched tight. Not daring to look, she closed her eyes to the world and prayed.

“Bring us to the other side. Bring us to the other side. Dear God, deliver us safely to the other side. Thank you, God, for delivering us to the other side. Please don’t let there be no hunters. Jus’ get us over to the other side.”

Once they reached the Ohio shore, Mattie thanked God for their safe arrival. Huddled on the free side, Mattie sat and watched as others made the nearly half-mile crossing. She prayed that God would get everyone else across as well. Two by two they climbed into the boat, leaving a shrinking group behind.

Near the end of the long night she saw the two final freedom seekers on the Virginia side of the river startle and run toward the forest. Mattie's mouth went dry and her palms went moist as adrenaline coursed through her body. She grabbed Jordan and made to run away from the river. Then she saw a large deer across the river. There were no bounty hunters, just tight nerves.

Collapsing back down to earth, she worked to steady her heart with a deep breath. She offered Jordan her breast and whispered to her daughter, "We free now. Honey, we free." She thought the air would feel different in freedom land, but it didn't. It was still hard to breathe.

Before sunrise a cart came for the group on the free side of the river and carried them northward. Soon Mattie and Jordan separated from the rest of the group. Since Congress had passed the Fugitive Slave Act in September 1850, few escaped slaves risked staying in the United States. The law was clear: free states had to return escaped slaves to their masters and punish those who aided or sheltered runaways. All those traveling with Mattie traveled on to Canada. But Mattie and Jordan turned west to join their family in Oberlin, Ohio. They had made it. After six exhausting weeks of traveling nearly five hundred miles they were nearly there.

Yet another stranger brought Mattie and Jordan to a small lean-to just ten miles from their new home. They were left alone to wait. This was their last day of hiding. Tonight they would be picked up and brought to Samuel and Emmanuel.

The dwelling could not even be called a cabin. From the footprints in the dust, Mattie knew it had recently been used— probably for the same purpose. She rested on the bare floor, leaning against the wall with nothing to do but wait. Jordan wandered around the empty room looking for something of interest.

Toddling over to Mattie, she proudly held out a treasure she had found in the corner: a decomposing mouse. Mattie slapped it out of Jordan's hand, exclaiming, "That dirty!" With a sigh, Mattie dragged herself upright to take a closer look around the room. She found no other dead rodents or anything else warranting removal. After kicking the mouse outside, Mattie sat back down on the floor to resume her wait.

A few hours passed before Mattie ate a little of the dried meat she had been left with. Getting used to small rations had been difficult, but after weeks on the road Mattie's stomach had shrunk to nearly nothing. She

hardly ate more than a few bites at a time. She and Jordan had both become so thin that their eyes sunk into their sockets, and they had little energy. Fortunately it didn't take much energy to wait.

On the second day they ran out of the food the driver had given them, and halfway through the third day their meager rations of water were gone. She looked for a source of water or food, but found nothing around the cabin.

Hungry, thirsty, and exhausted, Mattie pondered her options. If no one came, they would die of thirst in a few days. They had little choice but to travel west on their own. She could not gamble away her last bit of energy hoping someone would show.

Exhausted and desperate, she tied Jordan to her back and stumbled out of the cabin into the still dark morning. She trudged along in the forest of beech and elm trees, parallel to the road but out of sight. It was early enough in the day that dew still coated the leaves. Mattie licked the little bit of moisture off the plants, but it did nothing to quench her parched throat.

She traveled on and on through the hot, sticky morning, praying with each step that she would find a stream until her mouth became too dry to open. She journeyed farther and farther, hoping she was reading the sun right and heading in the right direction—toward her son and her husband, toward a town in the midst of this endless forest, toward some water.

When she stopped to rest and offer Jordan her breast, she discovered that her milk was dried up. Mattie had nothing to offer her daughter. She tied Jordan to her back with a ragged, dirty cloth and journeyed on. The little girl hung there listlessly, making no complaints or demands. Normally this would have been terrifying, but Mattie was grateful for the quiet. She continued on, forced to cut out to the road occasionally when the forest became too dense to pass through.

On one of these forays, Mattie heard the sound of running water on the other side of the road. As quickly as her body would allow, she stumbled to the sound. Water! A small stream cut close to the road from the north. With Jordan still tied to her back, Mattie collapsed to the ground on the bank of the stream and dropped her mouth into the water. Sucking the cool liquid past her cracked and bleeding lips, Mattie drank and drank and drank, forcing herself to stop when her stomach lurched in protest. Then she untied Jordan's limp body and laid her gently on the earth. Filling their leather pouch with water, she brought it to Jordan's lips and poured water into the

unresponsive child's mouth. The water dribbled out the sides of the girl's mouth.

"Baby, you got to swallow this. Come on now, girl," coaxed Mattie.

She dribbled water slowly into Jordan's mouth, watching carefully to see if her daughter was swallowing. She did not. Mattie's heart raced.

"Baby, you got to swallow!" begged Mattie.

But the water sat pooled in Jordan's dry mouth. Mattie watched as the water level lowered. Drip by drip, Mattie continues to pour cool liquid into Jordan's mouth, praying some of it, enough of it, would get down her small throat.

Eventually they both fell asleep on the damp earth by the stream in the midst of the forest, Mattie's body curled protectively around Jordan.

Waking in the dark, Mattie pulled Jordan close. "Let see if the good stuff flowin' again," Mattie muttered as she checked to see if she had made any milk. A bit of white came to the surface when she squeezed her nipple.

Bringing her breast close to Jordan, she said, "Try this, baby girl. Maybe I got a bunch of the stuff you love."

Mattie squirted a bit of precious white liquid into Jordan's mouth. The girl swallowed the little bit of milk from her momma's breast. Mattie expressed more past her daughter's lips. That was swallowed too. Mattie pulled Jordan close, but Jordan did not latch on. She was too weak.

Instead Mattie spent more than an hour squeezing a thin stream of liquid into her daughter's mouth and waiting patiently for Jordan to have the energy to swallow.

"Dear Lord, please let this milk be enough to keep my baby girl alive."

In the morning Mattie woke suddenly and immediately checked on Jordan. She was weak, but still alive. She pulled Jordan close. This time the girl latched on.

After a good feed Mattie got ready to go again. As hard as it would be to leave this stream, staying here would not make Jordan better. They needed food and a warm place to rest. With a belly full of water and full pouch, Mattie and Jordan set out once again.

At first Mattie stayed in the forest passing under huge elms and beech trees, but soon she became too tired to make her way through the thick undergrowth. She was trudging down the long, straight road when she saw a horse pulling a wagon far in the distance. Mattie limped back into the forest

and crouched behind a tree, waiting for the wagon to pass. But the wagon stopped a ways down the road.

“Whoo, whoo, whoo,” called the driver. Then the horse moved forward.

“Whoo, whoo, whoo,” called the driver again, and again the wagon moved forward.

Over and over the horse came forward, stopped, the driver called out, and then moved the wagon forward again.

Mattie crouched in the forest, hidden from view, straining to see while staying hidden. The call was the same signal she had listened for so many weeks ago in the forest in Virginia. But she did not expect it here in Ohio. This might be the missing driver. She wanted to see him before she showed herself. His looks were scant evidence to go by, but that was all she had.

When the wagon moved just past her, she leaned around the tree to get a better view. She could just make out the profile of the driver as he gazed into the forest. Two large coffee-colored hands held the reins. A straw hat with a low brim threw a shadow over the man’s face. She had to decide without a good look at his features. He might be the missing conductor, or it might be a trap. Some bounty hunters were negro.

The wagon drove on. A plaid work shirt covered the man’s broad back. A slight person sat next to him in the wagon. They were both searching the forest each time the wagon stopped. She watched as they moved down the road away from her. She only had moments to decide. The smaller figure turned his head, looking backwards. Mattie studied his profile.

“Oh, dear Lord. Thank you, Lord! Thank you!” Mattie cried out.

She stumbled out to the road. “Samuel!” her hoarse voice cracked out. “Emmanuel!”

They did not hear her.

She yelled again, but it came out as a whisper. Her throat was too dry. She collapsed on the ground. Grabbing for her water bag, she removed the stopper with shaking hands. The wagon was moving on. Quickly she drank some water, swallowing hard to coat her throat.

She took a deep breath, put all her energy in her throat, and yelled, “Emmanuel!”

The two figures turned at the sound of her voice.

“Momma!” exclaimed Samuel. He leapt off of the wagon and ran back to Mattie and Jordan.

“Oh, baby! Oh, baby!” Mattie cried in relief. “Thank you, Lord! Thank you!”

“Momma, Momma, we found you!” Samuel exclaimed.

Samuel fell into Mattie’s embrace right on the ground in the middle of the road. Emmanuel rushed up behind them. Kneeling on the ground he wrapped his arms around them all.

They sat in the middle of the road, hugging and laughing and crying. Jordan reached up to pat her mother’s head.

“Baby girl, you want to be part of this too,” Mattie declared.

Emmanuel helped Mattie untie Jordan from her back.

For the first time ever, Mattie held both of her children close. She hugged Samuel with her right arm and held Jordan tight in her left. Jordan pushed Samuel away from Mattie.

“Jordan, this your brother Samuel,” Mattie said gently. “And this here your daddy.”

Jordan stared at the two figures before her, moving her gaze between the two. Her bottom lip quivered a bit.

“It all right, honey,” Mattie assured her, hugging her close.

“We gonna be a family now,” Samuel explained to his baby sister.

“We sure are,” Emmanuel agreed, embracing them all.

None of them wanted to stop talking and hugging to make their way to the wagon, but eventually they did.

“How you come to be lookin’ for me?” Mattie wondered as they traveled home.

“Mr. Mattox told me the fellow that was gonna bring you to us was being watched so he didn’ get you. They went a few days later, but you was gone. We figured you be somewhere in this forest and you’d come out if’n you saw it was me and James.”

“James!?” Mattie echoed, shaking her head. “It gonna take me a while to get used to our new names. Thomas, James, Georgia, and Jennie Freedman.”

“I like Jennie,” Emmanuel smiled. “You picked a fine name for the baby.”

“Hard to imagine, but she ain’t never gonna remember being Jordan.”

Chapter 17

SPRING 1851

Lisbeth's twice daily ritual was unchanged though Mattie had been gone nearly two years. Gazing out the window in the early evening, Lisbeth watched as a storm of activity swelled up. In the distance she made out a group of four anonymous men carrying a collapsed person away from the fields. Rebecca followed close behind. As they drew nearer to the Quarters, Lisbeth realized that they were carrying Poppy. Too soon they disappeared from her sight and into his cabin. Lisbeth continued to watch out for some time but did not catch another glimpse of either Poppy or Rebecca before Emily arrived to dress her for supper.

Lisbeth nodded toward the Quarters when she saw her maid. "Poppy has collapsed. Have you any news?"

Emily shook her head and said, "Cook says they found him at the end of a row of plantin'. No one saw when he went down so no one know what happened."

"Can he speak? Is he conscious?"

Emily shrugged.

The next morning Lisbeth watched for Poppy, but he did not emerge from his cabin. Rebecca went in carrying food and water before she went off to the fields. Over a breakfast of soft-boiled eggs, dropped biscuits, and peach marmalade, Lisbeth asked Mother if she should pay him a call.

"Whyever would he want to see you?" scoffed Mother. "He is an ill old man. Let him rest. He does not need a fourteen-year-old girl as his nurse. If they need our assistance the overseer will inform me. I am sure he will be fine with rest."

"Mary goes with her mother to tend to ill slaves."

Mother replied sharply, "Each plantation has its own ways. In Fair Oaks the overseer and your father take care of the field hands while Mrs. Gray

and I see to the house. You are quite aware of our arrangement by now. We do not need you to tell us how to run the plantation.”

Embarrassed, Lisbeth changed the subject. “Mother, I saw the first crocus of spring yesterday. Can we have a picnic to celebrate?”

“What a lovely idea. Whom do you wish to invite?”

“I thought it would be for us, you and me, this afternoon,” Lisbeth said out loud, but in her mind she added, *Like Mattie and I used to do.*

“This is a wonderful opportunity for you to practice hosting,” Mother declared, ignoring Lisbeth’s suggestion. “We shall hold it a week from Saturday. Invitations can go out today. Ten days is adequate notice.” Mother went on, mumbling to herself, “A small group—a dozen at the most. All four of the Fords, Edward and Emma Cunningham, of course. I believe it would be in poor taste to pass over Camilla Anderson, so she must be on the list too. But we shall do our best to make certain she is paired with... Matthew Johnson.” Mother nodded confidently.

Mother then moved on to food. “What shall you serve?”

“Perhaps some fruit and cornbread.”

“Something nicer is in order—scones with clotted cream, pickled cucumbers...It is too soon for berries. Cook will have ideas.” Mother added, “What a wonderful plan, Elizabeth.”

Lisbeth did not reply. This was not her plan at all. She had hoped for a picnic with just her mother. But there was no point in saying so.

Ignoring her mother’s advice, Lisbeth went down to the Quarters at the end of the day, but Rebecca would not let her in to visit Poppy.

“He real bad off,” Rebecca informed her. “He ain’t sittin’ up or swallowin’. We takin’ care of him best we can, but...” Rebecca’s voice broke, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“What are you saying?” Lisbeth cried. “He is not going to die, is he?”

“Hard to know. Some folks recover from such things, and other don’. Just add him to your prayers, that about all we can do.”

“Does the overseer know? Is the doctor coming?”

“They ain’t gonna call the doctor for an old man. He already lived longer than most folks. Besides, ain’t much a doctor can do for him now.”

Lisbeth swallowed hard. “I can bring him some salt and sugar if it will help.”

Rebecca smiled at the young woman. “A little bit of sugar water might be just the thing his body need. You go get some from Cook and bring it down to me. I make sure he get a taste of it. You know how he loves sweets. That gonna be a nice treat for him.”

Though Rebecca did put a bit of the sugar on Poppy’s lips that evening, he was too far into the next world to taste it. He passed over in the night, carried along by prayers, with Rebecca at his side.

In the morning Lisbeth stood alone at the window. She saw Rebecca’s husband and sons, Lawrence, Henry, and Frank, carry Poppy’s cloth-bound body to the slave cemetery. Dirt was piled up by a gape in the ground, prepared to accept him into the earth. Songs and cries filled the air as dirt poured over his body. Marked by a cross of branches, Poppy’s grave rested between his wife’s entombed body and his daughter’s empty grave. After the burial was over, the mourners trudged to work.

As the mourners spread out into the tobacco plants Lisbeth spoke out loud. “Mattie, your Poppy died today. I thought you would want to know. Now he is going to watch over you with your momma. He was very sick. Rebecca and I tried to help him. I gave him sugar and salt just as you would have wanted. I am sorry.”

“What you say, Miss?”

Lisbeth turned her tear-streaked face toward Emily’s placid one. “I was not speaking to you. You may dress me now.”



Lisbeth was sullen when she saw the overcast sky on the morning of her picnic, but the weather transformed into a beautiful spring day, brightening her mood as well. Mother had made all of the arrangements, though she gave Lisbeth credit for it. Two days earlier at comportment lessons, Mother bragged to her peers, “Elizabeth planned every last detail of the gathering.”

As the first guest arrived Lisbeth told her mother firmly, “I shall take care of the picnic from here on.”

“Are you certain?” Mother inquired. “I am happy to supervise Emily while you enjoy yourself?”

Wanting to take on this responsibility, to prove to herself and to her mother that she was growing into a fine lady, Lisbeth insisted, “Yes, I am certain. Please, go inside.”

Excited and nervous, Lisbeth greeted her friends on the veranda. After all the guests arrived Lisbeth announced to the group, "I shall drive with Emily in the wagon with the food. Jack will lead the rest of you on a lovely walk along the river."

Jack broke in, "Past the graveyards, oooh! You better be careful of the spooks—a fresh nigger is in the yard."

"Do not mind him," Lisbeth declared.

"Never fear, ladies, I will protect you," Edward Cunningham shouted.

"Then you are all in trouble. Go home while you can. Stay away. Stay awaaaay," teased Robert Ford.

Edward shoved Robert who collapsed to the ground. Rolling around, wrestling with an unseen ghost, Robert yelped, "Help me, Edward, help me. I am being attacked."

"Enough, you two," Lisbeth shouted. "Start walking."

Mary Ford asked Lisbeth, "Shall I come with you to assist?"

"Yes, Mary. Thank you."

Matthew Johnson spoke up eagerly, "I would be happy to assist you as well."

"Thank you for your kind offer," Lisbeth smiled at him, "but I believe Mary and I will be fine. You enjoy the walk with the others."

From the wagon, Mary and Lisbeth waved to the energetic group of teens. As they drove past, Matthew nodded, but disappointment showed on his face.

"Matthew is entirely in love with you," Mary declared when the group was out of earshot.

"I suppose," Lisbeth replied. "He is very nice...but I am not in love with him. He will simply have to suffer. I am not certain why Mother put him on the list. Mother and Father have their sights set on either Edward or your brother, Robert, though they swore me not to tell even you."

"It would be grand to have you as my sister. Do you fancy either of them?"

"Robert is amusing, and Edward is handsome, but so far I am not in love with anyone. I am still waiting for Cupid to shoot an arrow at me. Who do you fancy?" Lisbeth asked. "Jack perhaps? We would be sisters twice over if you marry Jack and I marry Robert."

"Your brother is entirely too wild!" Mary laughed. "Not that mine are any less so."

Lisbeth rolled her eyes and nodded in agreement. “Who do you fancy?”

“Daniel Bartley has the kindest eyes.”

“Oh, no,” Lisbeth declared, “if it is eyes you are after, Matthew’s are the loveliest.”

“You are wrong! Daniel’s eyes are the most lovely—such a bright blue.”

“I prefer Matthew’s hazel eyes. Much more interesting than plain old blue.”

Lisbeth instructed the driver to stop the wagon at a grassy spot just past the slave cemetery on top of a rise. They would have a lovely view of the James River for their meal.

Emily and the driver pulled out navy blue wool blankets and spread them on the bright green grass. The picnic basket they took from the wagon produced a delicious spread that included scones with clotted cream, crumpets, sweet potato buns, canned peaches, and pickled cucumbers. When they were finished setting out the treats they waited demurely on the blankets.

Though Lisbeth had imagined a mature, adult meal eaten in leisure and punctuated by quiet conversation, the boys had a different plan. They quickly devoured the food, hardly tasting it at all, before setting out to test their strength against one another. Drawing a circle in a patch of dirt on the ground, Edward shouted, “King’s Domain.”

Robert leapt up and yanked hard on Edward’s arm, unseating him from his “throne.” The boys lined up to play as the girls watched from the blanket and whispered to one another.

Lisbeth leaned in close to Mary, “Look, Daniel is trying to get Jack out. He looked at you to make certain you are watching.”

“He did it!” Mary clapped as Daniel pulled Jack out of the ring.

Daniel kept the throne through three more turns, but Matthew finally unseated him. Daniel smiled at Mary as he walked past.

“His eyes are definitely more beautiful than Matthew’s,” Mary whispered into Lisbeth’s ear.

“Absolutely not!” Lisbeth replied, smiling at her friend.

Mary’s other brother Albert took a go at Matthew, but walked away in defeat. Neither Jack nor Nathaniel Jackson were able to unseat him. Finally it was Edward’s turn.

“Watch how a true man does it,” Edward said as he strutted over to Matthew.

The two young men locked eyes. Matthew planted his feet wide and firm on the ground. He did not break eye contact as Edward grabbed his arm and gave a strong tug. Matthew did not budge. Edward pulled harder and harder, but still Matthew did not move. Though Edward was the taller of the two, Matthew was strong and muscular. Matthew's legs shook as Edward used all his strength to pull. Matthew bent slightly at the waist, and a small smile crept over Edward's face. Matthew suddenly bent over farther, throwing Edward off balance, and then pulled back quickly while twisting his wrist to break free of Edward's grip. Edward stumbled backwards and nearly fell to the ground, but caught himself at the last moment by stepping back and crossing out of the boundary. He had lost the game.

Smirking at Matthew, Edward turned to the group and shouted, "Enough of this!" He challenged the boys, "Who can hit the river with a stone?"

Following his lead, the boys gathered rocks and pitched them downhill at the moving water. Matthew smiled and shrugged at Lisbeth before he joined the gang of boys in competition.

"Mary?" Robert shouted to his sister. "Whose stone went farther, mine or Albert's?"

Always the diplomat, Mary responded, "I cannot say. They both went in the water; how can one judge?"

Edward turned away from the water and toward the slave cemetery. "Aim for that cross," Edward declared, pointing in the distance.

Lisbeth watched him pitch a stone and strike the cross. Robert, Albert, and Jack immediately followed suit. Lisbeth's breath caught. They were pummeling Poppy's marker. Hard stones smashed it over and over again. The cross jerked back with each blow. Lisbeth watched in disgust as the horizontal arm sagged downward until it was hanging to the right.

Outraged, Lisbeth leapt up and shouted, "Stop! You are being disrespectful."

"To whom? The niggers?" scoffed Edward. "Since when do we have to be respectful to niggers?"

"It is wrong to be rude to the dead." Lisbeth turned to Mary for support, but her friend shrugged.

All eyes were on Lisbeth. She searched for the right words, but her mind was blank. Flooded by shame, embarrassed to have spoken up, she wanted everyone to stop staring at her. Apparently she was alone in her feelings.

“Too easy,” Matthew casually broke the uncomfortable silence. “Anyone can hit that cross. Now, the cottonwood takes skill,” Matthew challenged.

He lobbed a stone at a far-away tree. All eyes turn away from Lisbeth. Stones started flying toward the cottonwood. Grateful to Matthew for deflecting everyone’s attention, Lisbeth stared at him until he looked over at her. She smiled and nodded across the distance. He smiled back shyly. She sank down to the ground and tried to enjoy the rest of the picnic, pretending not to care so deeply.

Chapter 18

JUNE 1856

“I do not care if you have scarlet fever, you will be in attendance at White Pines this evening. Now get dressed,” declared Mother. “My goodness, Elizabeth, you act as if this dance is inconsequential. It would be the gravest of insults to Edward and the Cunningham family. In fact, we would be publicly declaring our rejection of a match. We certainly do not want to leave that impression,” Mother said sternly. “I fear you are taking risks with your future. While it may seem assured that Edward will be asking you to marry him, your position is not guaranteed until the engagement is announced. I promise you Camilla Anderson has not given up her intention to be his bride.”

Lisbeth retorted, “If he wants to marry Camilla rather than me, then let him. I do not care.”

Mother stiffened and stared at Lisbeth in outrage. “You should care! You know very well this marriage will ensure your social standing for the rest of your life. Robert Ford would be an acceptable match, but your father and I would much prefer you marry into the Cunningham family. I know you find the idea of Mary as a sister-in-law romantic, but romance will not ensure your happiness as easily as the finer things in life. Going to a dance with a chill is sacrifice worth making for your future happiness.”

“Do you really believe I will be happy with Edward as a husband?” Lisbeth asked.

“Absolutely. He has everything a woman needs. He will be inheriting the largest estate in the valley. White Pines is as grand as any home in England, and I am certain they have at least seventy-five workers.”

“But is he a good man?” Lisbeth asked.

“A good man?” Mother sniffed. “What a question, Elizabeth. Of course he is. He comes from one of the oldest families in Virginia. Honestly, I do not know where you get such ideas. It must come from reading Jane

Austen. You are not a character in a romantic novel. You are nineteen years old. You need to stop being childish and start acting like the young lady you are. Now get ready.

“Emily!” Mother shouted loudly to Lisbeth’s maid who waited in the next room.

“Yes, ma’am?” responded Emily.

“Please help your mistress get ready. I want her in the second hair style we tried yesterday, the one with the triple upsweep.”

“Yes, ma’am. As you wish.”

Lisbeth supposed she should feel flattered and excited at the prospect of marrying Edward. His home was grand and he was handsome. But she found nothing inspiring about him. He talked of nothing interesting and was always distracted. He hardly ever looked at her while they were dancing. She did not believe that he cared for her at all. He was simply going along with their parents’ wishes. Lisbeth desired to be in love with the man she would marry. What could Mother possibly understand about love? Lisbeth had so hoped to be a target of Cupid’s arrow, but it seemed that was not to be.



White Pines contained the grandest ballroom in the valley, built specifically to accommodate long lines for the Virginia Reel. Women in long, colorful silk gowns with plunging necklines packed the room. Herringbone corsets constricted their capacity to breathe and their appetites. Plates of untouched food sat on laps. Dresses twirled to the music and voices interspersed with the notes from the chamber orchestra.

As Lisbeth danced with Edward, the blurry swirl made her dizzy. She told Edward, “Please stop. I feel faint.” But he did not hear her. He was busy scanning the room and was not looking at her. If he had bothered to take notice he would have seen that she suddenly grew pale. Then she collapsed. Fortunately Edward caught her in his arms so she did not fall to the floor. He carried her to a chair by the open doors adjacent to the veranda.

If fainting were less common at these events, she might have drawn more attention. But women regularly collapsed on the dance floor. Doctors attributed it to their weak constitutions rather than to the true cause: corsets.

Mary Ford and Matthew Johnson followed Lisbeth and Edward off the dance floor and gathered round their friend.

Edward said, "You look better already."

"Yes, I am, thank you. I have a slight chill. It must have left me lightheaded."

"I am glad to see you are well again. You shall understand if I go on to my duties as a host," Edward declared while scanning the crowd. "I would not leave you, but I have a dance with Camilla. You will look after her, will you not?" he asked Mary and Matthew.

"Please, go ahead," replied Lisbeth. "I would hate to spoil your evening in any way."

"You could never spoil anything," Edward replied. "Matthew, will you see to it she gets punch?"

Mary broke in, "We will both stay with her. I do not dance again until the waltz."

"I will be more than happy to take care of these lovely ladies," chimed in Matthew.

Edward parted with a kiss on Lisbeth's right hand then crossed the floor to greet his next dance partner. Lisbeth watched Edward escort Camilla to the dance floor, bow, and take her in his arms.

Mary broke into Lisbeth's thoughts. "Lisbeth, do not worry. He has to dance with Camilla, but I know it is you he is most fond of. No one is more beautiful than you."

Lisbeth smiled at her friend. "You are a dear to worry on my account, but it is of no concern to me. I understand the duties of a good host. He will return to me soon enough."

"Lisbeth?" Matthew asked.

"Yes."

"She called you 'Lisbeth.' I have never heard you called that name before."

"It is my childhood name. I wanted everyone to call me that when I was young. My parents never went along with it, but many of my girlhood friends still call me Lisbeth."

"How sweet. It suits you."

"Why, thank you kindly, sir," Lisbeth beamed at him. "That is one of the nicest things a gentleman has ever said to me. But I have adjusted myself to being known as Elizabeth."

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

“Now you flatter me with Shakespeare,” flirted Lisbeth.

Surprise registering on his face, Matthew asked, “You are a fan of the old master?”

“Oh, yes. I have read nearly all his work. *Hamlet* is my favorite.”

“Not *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*?”

“No, I prefer tragedies to comedies. Though of course *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* is wonderful as well.”

“Do you care for any contemporary authors?” Matthew inquired.

“I adore Jane Austen.”

Matthew nodded. “I find her portrait of British society so accurate and yet so dreadful.”

“I agree. It must be awful to be so bound by what society expects,” Lisbeth answered. “I am so glad to have been born in America, where one has freedom.”

“I am glad to be an American too,” Matthew agreed, but then he went on to challenge her, “but one has to wonder how much freedom exists here. But enough about literature. I am failing in my responsibilities. Now, if you will excuse me ladies, I will fetch you both punch.”

As Matthew walked away, Mary scolded Lisbeth. “Lisbeth, you know a lady does not talk about books with a gentleman.”

“He broached the subject,” Lisbeth defended herself. “A lady must follow where a gentleman leads,” Lisbeth mimicked Miss Taylor. “Besides, he is hardly a true gentleman. As Mother puts it, he is ‘barely more than a farmer.’ Although he truly is one of the kindest men I know. Can you imagine Edward noting that you call me ‘Lisbeth’? I wonder if I would be happier with Matthew than with Edward?”

“Oh, Lisbeth, you are ridiculous!” Mary declared. “Matthew will not be inheriting any of his family’s land as the third-born son. Edward will be getting all of this. You could not possibly refuse.”

Mary went on, “It will be wonderful for you to be the mistress of White Pines. Look at this grand ballroom! It has no rival in the valley. You shall host the most wonderful dances. And Edward is so handsome. How can you put all this at risk by flirting with Matthew Johnson?”

Shocked, Lisbeth declared, “I was not flirting with Matthew. I was only making pleasant conversation.”

Mary scolded back, “That is not how it appeared to me.”

Lisbeth replied, "I simply find Matthew Johnson interesting. I always have. That does not mean I am flirting with him. Besides, it is harmless fun. Edward is everything I should want in a husband, but he is not interesting or amusing. He does not care about what I am thinking nor do we converse about books—or anything else for that matter."

Mary reassured her friend, "I am sure when you are married you and Edward will have plenty to speak about."

"I suppose. I certainly hope you are right. Shhh, here comes Matthew."

After drinking the punch brought by Matthew, Lisbeth returned to the dance floor to fulfill the obligations on her dance card. Her last dance of the evening was with Edward.

In his arms she asked, "Edward, do you believe a rose by any other name would smell as sweet?"

"Actually, I have never cared for the scent of roses. They give me a headache. So it hardly matters to me what they are called."

Changing the subject, he went on. "Mother has made the final arrangements for your tea tomorrow. Remember, she is quite old-fashioned. She prefers young ladies who are pleasant and not outgoing. You can manage, can you not?"

"You need not worry. I shall thoroughly impress your mother with my ladylike demeanor."

"That is a good girl." Edward patted her on the back. "I will not be present, of course, but Emma shall be. I have asked her to assist you, to treat you as a sister."

"I shall be glad of her company."

Chapter 19

“Tell me everything. I want to hear absolutely every last detail,” Mary commanded Lisbeth as they strolled through the gardens at Fair Oaks.

“The event was so lovely. Edward made his mother out to be so stern, but she was charming.”

“Where did you eat and what did they serve?” Mary asked.

“We had a tasty spread out on the veranda overlooking the gardens. The teacakes were the best I have ever eaten with the most delicious clotted cream. The watercress and cream cheese sandwiches were very dainty with no crust. We had tea, of course, but they also served the most wonderful hot chocolate. I believe they make it with cow’s milk. It was rich and delicious. At Fair Oaks we serve hot chocolate only on Christmas Eve, made with water. It is not nearly as rich. But Emma did not remark on it, so I imagine they have it at many special occasions. Watermelon, peaches, and strawberries were presented on a beautiful silver platter.”

Lisbeth continued, “It was all so tasteful. Their hands are so skilled that I did not notice when they replenished our plates, but they must have, for each plate was full at all times. I noted that Mrs. Cunningham does not acknowledge them as they come and go so our conversation was not interrupted in the slightest. Mrs. Cunningham put me entirely at ease. She asked me about my friends, my family, and my favorite styles. She knows ever so much about the latest fashions. We compared the merits of silk and velvet.”

Mary wondered, “Did you get a tour of White Pines?”

“Nearly all of it. It was so dear and clever how they found an excuse for me to see the private rooms of the house. It felt very natural, not forced in the slightest. Emma pretended to break a hair comb, then she asked me to accompany her to get another. Of course, one was not to be found in the first room, so we had to go on a hunt from room to room. We did not go to

all of them, there are so many, but we went into quite a few. All the while Emma was speaking to me as if it were the most natural thing for me to be accompanying her through sleeping chambers.

“The house is lovely and has beautiful decor. Mrs. Cunningham has remarkable taste. It is such a lovely balance of traditional and modern. All the beds are new four posters in deep cherry and the spreads are the latest in silk damask. But the washstands are old-fashioned with inlaid wood and marble tops. Each bedchamber has a fine Persian rug. It all appears to be wonderful. Emma even devised a means for showing me the kitchen. She found a dish in one of the rooms and decided to return it to the kitchen. They must have planned the route for days. It was so thoughtful to give me such a complete tour in such a natural fashion.”

Mary beamed. “Oh, Lisbeth, I am so excited for you. You are the most fortunate girl to find such a good husband with such a dear sister and mother. His mother was not distasteful at all?”

“Quite the contrary, I think I shall learn much from her. And Emma and I shall be dear friends,” Lisbeth replied then she quickly amended, “Not dearer friends than you and I, of course.”

Mary smiled at Lisbeth then asked, “Did you see the grounds?”

“We took a walk in the gardens after tea. Casually I suggested we take a turn that would lead us toward the Quarters, but Mrs. Cunningham replied that nothing of interest lay in that direction. Apparently they do not think I need be concerned with the field hands. Since they wanted me to see the rear of the house, I can infer that I will be expected to oversee the house slaves. Eventually, of course, not right away. We have the same arrangement at Fair Oaks, so I am comfortable with it.”

Mary commented, “Lisbeth, only a week ago you wondered if Edward would be a good husband simply because he does not converse about books.”

“Yes, I do feel rather foolish,” Lisbeth agreed. “Thank heaven for you, dear Mary. I can speak such foolishness out loud and see what it is worth. How could I even consider not becoming a Cunningham and the future mistress of White Pines?”

“Hard to imagine you thought Matthew Johnson could possibly be a more suitable husband than Edward Cunningham,” Mary agreed. “Have you heard? He is moving to Ohio to farm. Daniel says he has become an abolitionist.”

“An abolitionist!” Lisbeth burst out. “I declare, I am so tired of hearing that awful word! It is all anyone speaks of these days. I wish we would simply secede and end all this tiresome conversation.”

“Father believes it will mean war.”

“I cannot imagine why. Who cares if we are one country or two? What is there to fight over?”

Chapter 20

Lisbeth woke with a start. She did not remember her dream, but adrenaline rushed through her body from something that had disturbed her in her sleep. She lay in bed for a few moments, steadying her breathing and thinking about this day.

This was the day that would seal her life forever. Today she would be presented as Edward's intended bride. Twenty years old, and her life was set. Her family was hosting a dinner to celebrate her birthday and their engagement would be announced.

Lisbeth acknowledged Emily, who had arrived with the tea tray. Emily set it upon the table by the divan and returned to her small chamber. Lisbeth rose. She poured herself a cup of the hot beverage, added two teaspoons of sugar and a splash of cream. Taking the cup with her, she went to the window to gaze out as she did every morning. The workers were already in the fields. She could barely see the pen of babies at the end of a row. Sarah, who was only six months older than Lisbeth, had two children being watched over while she hoed. Grandma Washington was long since dead, and Lisbeth no longer tracked who cared for the children of the field hands.

Lisbeth had a year to plan for the most lavish wedding of next spring, but it still seemed too soon. Mother had already given birth to Lisbeth and was pregnant with Jack by the time she was twenty. Lisbeth knew she should feel ready to be married, but she did not.

"Emily," Lisbeth called out, "I am going to wear the cream linen dress. Get it ready."

"Yes, miss," Emily replied.

Emily pulled out a corset and hoop skirt made from herringbones from the wardrobe. Lisbeth slipped the corset over her head and lay down on the bed. Emily bent over Lisbeth and pulled hard on the strings, bringing the edges of the corset closer and closer until they finally touched. Lisbeth rose,

taking a few small breaths to accustom herself to the constriction. With a sigh, she put on cotton bloomers and then stepped into the four-boned hoop skirt. She raised her arms to allow Emily to lower the linen dress over the underskirt.

Lisbeth sat in front of the vanity while Emily slicked down her hair and arrange it in a hairnet.

“Emma will be bringing her maid this afternoon. I believe her name is Margaret. You will spend time with her while she is here. She will start to familiarize you with the routines at White Pines.”

“Yes, miss.”

Lisbeth explained, “We are both fortunate to be moving to such a grand estate.”

“Yes, miss.”

“Do you not agree?” Lisbeth demanded.

“It is not my place to agree or disagree, miss.”

“You do not believe I am making a good marriage?” Lisbeth was outraged.

“Miss, it is not my place to say.”

“Please, Emily,” Lisbeth whined. “I want you to speak the truth to me.”

Emily replied in a steady voice, “You do not seem to be pleased.”

“That is not true!” Lisbeth protested. “I am delighted at this match. This is all I could have dreamed of. White Pines is a beautiful home. Emma is the kindest sister I could have hoped for. Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham have done everything imaginable to extend a welcome into their family.”

Emily ventured carefully, “And young Mr. Cunningham?”

Lisbeth’s eyebrows furrowed. “What do you mean by that question? Edward is a handsome gentleman. His manners are impeccable. I am finished with this conversation. Have you completed my hair?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Then leave me be!” she scolded.

Emily stepped back, but Lisbeth did not rise. She sat in stony silence, staring at her reflection. A fury that she did not understand buzzed through her veins.

“I do not know what is the matter with me!” she declared out loud.

Emily stood by silently. Lisbeth rose and crossed over to the window. She watched the scene before her, hoping it would calm her as it had on many

other occasions. But today it did not help. She paced the room, which only served to agitate her further.

“I am sure these are just premarital nerves,” Lisbeth declared. “Mother says everyone has them.”

Emily nodded.

“I believe I need a rest. I will lay down for a few minutes.”

“As you like, miss. Shall we remove your clothing?”

Lisbeth sighed. “No.”

Tears of frustration worked at the edges of Lisbeth’s eyes. She did not have time to undress and redress, so she would not get the rest she hoped for. She sat on the edge of her bed, careful not to muss her clothing. Without thought, her hand snaked under her pillow to find the comfort of Mattie’s shell. She rubbed it between her fingers until she was relaxed again.

Instead of returning the shell to its hiding spot, she reached up to tie it around her neck. She carefully tucked it under the high neckline of her dress. She examined herself in the mirror over the fireplace. The shell was invisible under the cream-colored fabric, but she could feel its comfort against her heart.

“Emily, is this visible to you?”

“No, miss. No one would think you were wearing it,” Emily replied.



A few hours later Edward proved Emily wrong. The group of celebrants were gathered in the garden. Old women and men perched on chairs around small tables with bouquets of wild flowers. Young men and women sat on blankets, enjoying boisterous conversations. Lisbeth sat on a blanket next to Mary. Mary’s beau, Daniel Bartley, was telling them an amusing story. Lisbeth’s heart caught when she saw Matthew Johnson walking toward her. She smiled across the distance, but before Matthew reached her, Mr. Wainwright asked everyone to gather around. Lisbeth gave a shy shrug to Matthew before standing beside Edward. A horseshoe of people gathered around Lisbeth, Edward, and their parents.

Mr. Wainwright spoke out, “It is with great pleasure that we announce the betrothal of our only daughter, Elizabeth, to Mr. Edward Langston Cunnigham.”

The crowd gave polite applause.

Mr. Cunningham then addressed the gathering, "We are delighted to welcome Elizabeth into our family. As a token of our pleasure we present her with this necklace."

Edward opened the jewelry box, exhibiting it in a slow arc to the crowd who responded with obvious approval. He then turned it toward Lisbeth. A large, deep blue sapphire hung down the center with smaller sapphires marching up the sides of the necklace. It was too large for her taste, but her eyes shone with the delight she knew he and everyone else expected. Edward stared at her with anticipation.

"Thank you so much. It is lovely," Lisbeth spoke loud enough for all to hear.

Edward continued to stare expectantly. Finally he jerked his head and motioned in a circle with his finger.

"Oh!" Lisbeth said as she twirled around to present her neck to her fiancé.

As Edward stepped close, Lisbeth became extremely aware of the shell at her heart. She resisted the temptation to touch it. Edward reached around and fastened the shining necklace at her throat. She felt a small tug on the string of the shell. He knew it was there. She turned around and the crowd clapped once again. Lisbeth smiled at them and then at Edward. But he did not return her gaze.

As the crowd broke up Edward hissed in her ear, "What are you wearing around your neck?"

"Oh, this?" asked Lisbeth. Feigning indifference, she fingered the string at her neck. Thinking quickly she made up a story. "I always wear it on my birthday. It is an old gift from a dear friend who moved away."

Edward hissed quietly, "Well, it is not at all suitable for an event such as this. A string around your neck! Honestly, sometimes I do not know how you get by at all."

"No one can see it," Lisbeth countered. "It is entirely private."

"I know it is there," Edward insisted.

"Yes, Edward. Of course, I do not know what came over me," Lisbeth acquiesced. "I can be overly sentimental sometimes. I shall not wear it around you again."

"Thank you. Now let us greet our guests as betrothed."

First they circulated to the small tables, making polite conversation and accepting the best wishes of the elders and married adults in their community. When someone asked for a closer look at her jewels, Lisbeth made sure to hold the sapphire out against the palm of a hand so that no one would notice the bump of the shell under her gown.

Eventually the newly engaged couple were able to sit with their friends. After showing off the necklace and discussing wedding arrangements, the conversation turned to their honeymoon.

“I would love to go to Paris,” Lisbeth said. “Or perhaps London. Europe sounds beautiful and intriguing. I would go anywhere in Europe, even Rome!”

“I would be afraid to travel so far!” Mary declared.

“Not I,” Lisbeth replied. “I should love such an adventure.”

“New York City will be adventure enough for me,” declared Edward. “I see no need to leave the shores of this country. I certainly have no need to listen to people speak French or Italian.”

“French is a beautiful language,” Matthew interjected.

“It may be beautiful,” Edward replied, “but I have no need of it!”

“Sounds like you will be going to New York on your honeymoon,” Mary announced.

“I suppose,” Lisbeth nodded.

She discreetly rubbed at the fabric over the shell.

Chapter 21

A year of vigorous planning passed quickly. The ceremony would be held at Mt. Vernon Christian Church at 2 p.m. on May 14, 1858. Four hundred guests were expected to be in attendance at both the ceremony and the reception. After much debate, the families decided to follow tradition and hold the reception at the home of the bride.

Lisbeth's trousseau was nearly finished, though none of it would ever be used. Her handiwork would be stored away since much finer linens were in use at White Pines. But since protocol required a lady to bring a trousseau to her marriage, hers would be complete. She had two more napkins to finish by May.

Lisbeth arrived at White Pines to celebrate her twenty-first birthday with a tea for her friends and family. Emma greeted Lisbeth with an eager embrace.

"Elizabeth, the seamstress has brought my gown for your wedding! Come see. Mary, you come as well."

The three young women ascended the stairs to Emma's bedchamber. With a flourish Emma produced a pale green silk gown. The low neckline, trimmed with deep green ribbon dotted by small pearls, would draw special attention.

"It is beautiful, Emma. You shall outshine me on my own wedding day!"

Mary protested, "No, Lisbeth. Your wedding gown is the most beautiful dress I have ever seen. The sheer layer of silk over the skirt shall set the fashion trend for next year. I wish my mother would allow me to wear something as stylish in my wedding."

Emma responded, "'Lisbeth,' what a silly name. I much prefer you as Elizabeth. It is ever so much more elegant. You need a fashionable name to go with your fashionable dress."

“You are correct. I shall become entirely Elizabeth starting at the wedding,” Lisbeth nodded. “Mary, you must remember only to call me by Elizabeth once I am married. I shall be Elizabeth Cunningham and no longer Lisbeth Wainwright.”

The tea was characterized by the elegant simplicity Lisbeth had come to expect at White Pines. Naturally the conversation centered around wedding and honeymoon plans. Since Lisbeth’s expressed desire for an extended trip to Europe had been vetoed without any conversation, the newlyweds would be taking the train to New York City for the month of June. Lisbeth looked forward to walks through Central Park and visits to museums. Having never traveled to a city more glamorous than Richmond, she told herself that it would be adventure enough.

Edward’s mother asked her future daughter-in-law, “Elizabeth, dear, would you please go see what is taking Edward so long? I told him to return in time for tea. He is in the back garden, doing heaven knows what.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Cunningham.”

“You shall not be allowed to call me Mrs. Cunningham much longer. I expect to be Mother to you after the wedding.”

Lisbeth beamed. “And I look forward to calling you Mother,” Lisbeth replied as she kissed the elder woman’s smooth cheek before she departed to find her betrothed.

Lisbeth refused Emma and Mary’s offer to accompany her in order to have a few minutes alone with Edward. As she walked through the front garden, she felt overwhelmed with joy and utterly at peace. This wonderful home and this wonderful family would soon be hers. She had no doubt that this was the right choice.

Keeping her promise to Edward, she carried Mattie’s necklace in her pocket and touched the shell as she took in the beautiful grounds. It would be foolish to wear the necklace, but carrying it as a reminder of Mattie on her birthday seemed safe enough.

Lisbeth broadcast a silent message, “Mattie, wherever you are, I hope you are safe and happy. I am. I want you to know I am to have a wonderful marriage. You would be happy for me.”

In the back garden Lisbeth noticed a particularly grand willow tree, larger even than her favorite at Fair Oaks. Long branches reached all the way down to kiss the ground. Straying from her path, she parted the fine branches and was surrounded by cool air, the smell of moist soil, and hazy

light. Oh, this place was a treasure, a large, private umbrella. Soon she would be able to come here whenever she wished. Perhaps she would have a bench placed by the trunk so she could read in this protective shelter. This would be her haven. Someday she would bring her own daughter under these branches to take naps, learn to read, and share stories.

She heard the rustle of an animal on the other side of the trunk. Undaunted, she moved forward, counting 1...2...3...4...5... as she walked from the branches to the trunk of the tree.

Walking slowly around the trunk, being careful not to approach the animal too quickly, she came upon Edward. She stared at the sight before her although she could not comprehend it. Her eyes took in the length of his body, his pants around his ankles, his knees slightly bent, his naked buttocks, his thighs covered in thick black hair. His entire body pounded up and down with his head arched back and his eyes closed tight, shutting out the world. He was mounted on a field hand, fiercely thrusting himself into her, so intent on the pleasure of his own movements that he did not notice his fiancée.

Lisbeth looked past Edward into the eyes of the girl underneath him. The child stared up, her terrified, caramel brown eyes boring intensely into Lisbeth. Pain and shame filled her young face. She turned her head away as if to hide. Lisbeth's incomprehension slowly transformed into understanding and then to horror.

Lisbeth shook as a wave of anger and hatred flooded through her. Her stomach lurched, leaving the acrid taste of bile in her mouth. Purely disgusted, Lisbeth screeched, "Get off of her!" Then she ran from the shelter of the willow desperate to get away from the vile scene.

Sobbing and shaking, she was stumbling along the garden path when Edward grabbed her from behind and spun her to face him. She jerked her arm free, and screamed, "Do not touch me. You are despicable. I will never marry you!"

"Elizabeth, calm down," Edward soothed. "Let me explain."

Outraged, she stepped back and yelled at him, "Explain!? What explanation can you possibly provide? I saw all too clearly the act you were in!"

"I am not the first young man, nor will I be the last, to take pleasure before I am married. This does not affect the way I feel about you or the plans for our marriage. Nothing need change."

“For you perhaps, but not for me!” Lisbeth shouted. “I cannot imagine life with a man such as you.”

“A man such as me?” he scoffed. “Do not be foolish. All men are like me.”

“All men? How can you say such a thing?” Lisbeth was further enraged at his accusation. “Not my father! Not my brother!”

“Do not be so naïve,” Edward smirked. “You really are such a child.” Edward looked at her with pity and shook his head.

“How did you imagine so many light-skinned house slaves came to be? I assure you they are not the product of two niggers. As I recall, you have your share at Fair Oaks.”

Emily’s face swam before Lisbeth. Lisbeth’s anger was instantly deflated. A numbing horror filled her soul. She stared at Edward, blinking away tears. Edward slowly, gently put his arm through hers. Meeting no resistance, he turned her back toward the house. She let him lead her as thoughts whirled through her head.

Gently, as if speaking to a young child, Edward instructed her, “Elizabeth, we will tell everyone that you became ill. This is not such a falsehood. I understand you are quite shaken by this. You are so innocent, and I treasure that in you. You must go straight home. Rest. You need tell no one what transpired here. Once you are over this shock, you will understand everything is fine. You are so dear to me. It would not do to call off the wedding at this late date. Everything has been arranged.”

Lisbeth unconsciously nodded along to Edward’s soothing voice.

Chapter 22

Lisbeth stumbled up to her room and fell into bed. She burrowed into her feather pillow and replayed the events of the afternoon. She imagined what she could have done differently to prevent this horrible experience. She berated herself for being so impulsive. She wished that she had simply called out for Edward rather than stray from the path and take the liberty of parting the branches of the willow. Lisbeth struggled to forget all that she had seen. More than anything she wanted to get the image of the girl's desperate, caramel eyes pleading for release out of her mind. Eventually a troubled sleep, filled with chaotic dreams, overtook her.

That night she refused to come downstairs to supper, so Emily brought parsnip soup to her. Lisbeth scrutinized Emily's face. It was unmistakable. Emily's hazel eyes were identical to Jack's. How had she avoided that realization before?

Lisbeth asked, "Emily, did you ever live in the Quarters?"

Clearly surprised to be asked such a question, she replied, "I was born out there, but I have no memory of it."

Lisbeth nodded, but did not ask any further questions.

When Lisbeth did not rise from bed by the next afternoon Mother arrived, exasperated. "Elizabeth, whatever is the matter? Clearly you are not ill. I cannot imagine what has caused these kinds of theatrics. Do tell me what happened between you and Edward."

Grateful to be able to speak of it, Lisbeth blurted out, "Mother, at my birthday tea, when I went to find him in the gardens, Edward was...he was...he was with one of the slave girls. As a man is...with a woman."

"Is that all?" Mother questioned. "Well, of course you were traumatized if you saw the act. It truly is unpleasant to contemplate involvement in such an endeavor. But it is not as terrible as it appears."

Lisbeth stared at her mother, utterly shocked and perplexed at her response.

“Elizabeth,” Mother sighed as she explained, “men have needs that must be met before they are married to a lady. Ladies do not meet such needs before a wedding, but they must be met in some fashion. So men turn to the hands. I am sure it is quite flattering for a girl to have the attention of the young master of the house. You need not be concerned.”

“Does Father...? Has Jack...?” Lisbeth stammered in confusion.

Mother snapped, fury burning on her face, “It is not my place to know such things! Nor is it yours. Their relations outside this home are not our concern.”

“But is it not unchristian to behave in such a way?” wondered Lisbeth. “I thought the hands need our protection?”

“It is not as if they are true Christians,” retorted Mother. “Most of them are eager for such attention. They use it to earn special treatment. You cannot imagine they have the same moral standards we do, Elizabeth,” she added, sounding satisfied that she had set her daughter straight.

Unconvinced, Lisbeth argued back, “She did not appear to be eager, Mother. Not in the slightest.”

Impatience filled Mother’s voice, “Elizabeth, I realize it is difficult for you to understand. But you are about to be a married woman. You must stop being so naïve and idealistic. The world is not always kind. But every person has their place in it. Edward has his place, and the young slave has hers. You will have yours. We may not choose our place, we may not enjoy it, but we must accept it.”

Feeling unrestrained, Lisbeth asked, “Mother, is Emily my sis—”

Mother struck Lisbeth hard on the cheek. Clearly furious, she stated, “That is enough, Elizabeth. I am finished with this conversation! You have two more days to lie in bed and feel sorry for yourself. I expect you to be at dinner on Friday, dressed, with a smile on your face, ready to charm our guests. Have I made myself clear?”

Feeling entirely chastised, Lisbeth nodded.



The next day, after another night of troubled sleep, Lisbeth accepted a visit from Mary.

“What beautiful flowers!” Mary exclaimed.

“They are from Edward. And that garnet necklace as well,” Lisbeth replied, shaking her head with a frown on her face. Then she added, “Sent as peace offerings.”

“Did he do something for which he is sorry?” Mary asked with suddenly curiosity.

“I do not believe he is sorry for what he did. Though he wants me to believe he is. I am greatly troubled by it.”

After recounting the story of what occurred under the willow, Lisbeth asked her dear friend, “Mary, did you know such a thing was common?”

“Yes, I suppose so, though I have never heard anyone talk of it directly,” Mary admitted. “Light slaves are born on every plantation. My brothers often tease one another about whose seed made the harvest. I knew they were talking about sexual matters. I do not think it makes Edward so awful.”

“You think I should still marry him?” Lisbeth wondered, eager for her friend’s advice.

“Certainly! What alternative do you have?” Mary pointed out. “No one else is available for you to marry. Everyone is engaged. Robert would not break his engagement to marry you at this date. Do you imagine you would be able to find a match next year if you did such a thing? No one would find that an acceptable reason to end an engagement. Would your mother and father support such a choice?”

“Mother told me young men have needs that young ladies cannot satisfy until a wedding has occurred. She believes I am being overly dramatic and naïve. I feel so sad for that little negress. She was no more than a child. I am so ashamed to have seen what they were doing. Mother believes I have been traumatized by seeing the act but that I will get over it soon enough.”

Gently Mary replied, “I cannot see that you have any choice but to marry Edward. You would have to leave if you did not. Where could you possibly go?”

“Perhaps my mother’s sister would take me in. But only for a short time.” Lisbeth eyes stung. “Oh, Mary, I am so confused! I must decide soon.”

Mary lectured her friend, “Lisbeth, remember when you were eighteen and you thought it would be romantic to marry Matthew Johnson because you share a fondness for Shakespeare? You realized in time how foolish it

would be to make a marriage based on such an idea. This is no different. You cannot possibly choose a husband based on the literature he cares for, nor can you reject a husband for how he treats the hands. You would be giving up everything. For what? It changes nothing.”

Lisbeth sat in stony silence taking in her friends wisdom. She nodded slowly.

Mary went on, gently this time, “I know it is selfish of me, but I cannot bear the thought of you living anywhere but here. I imagine us drinking tea on the veranda at White Pines while we hear our children play in the garden.”

“I dream of that too.”

Mary pleaded with Lisbeth, “Please, put it out of your mind and continue with your plans.”

“I am trying to put it behind me, I promise,” Lisbeth assured her friend.

After Mary departed, Lisbeth sat on her rocking chair gazing out the window at the landscape below—the cookhouse and smokehouse, the willow tree, the Quarters, and the fields dotted with bent workers. She wanted to make out someone familiar, Rebecca or Sarah or Henry. But no one stood out. It had been so long since she had visited any of them. The habit had slowly slipped away over this year. She hardly knew them anymore.

She saw her brother Jack giving directions to the overseer. He had been spending more time outside since he turned nineteen, preparing for his eventual role as master of Fair Oaks. Watching the way he spoke to the overseer and looked at the hands, she knew with sudden, painful certainty: Edward spoke the truth. Yes, her brother too. He would use any of these workers for his personal satisfaction. Indeed, most likely, he already had—perhaps under her very own willow tree.

Overcome with sorrow, Lisbeth bent in half, sobbing. She cried so hard she could not breathe. Her lungs clamped in tight; she gasped for breath. Squeaking sounds rushed from her throat. Sobs wracked her body, harder and harder, until saliva poured out of her mouth. She gagged. Running to her washstand, she spit bile into the bowl. Too tired and overwhelmed to return to the rocker, she collapsed onto the floor. She took a towel from the stand and wiped her face, then she sat on the floor, leaned back against the shiny cherry washstand, and cried until she ran out of tears.



Before Lisbeth went to sleep that night, she prayed for guidance, "Please, Lord, show me what you will for me. If I am to marry Edward then take these images out of my mind and heart and return me to innocence. If I am not to marry Edward, then guide me to another path. Please, God, show me what I am to do."

More troubled dreams filled Lisbeth's sleep. *She was being chased through willow branches. She cried out as long, green vines slapped at her legs and tugged at her hair. She ran, gasping for breath with every step, then suddenly fell hard, landing on top of a small body. She looked down. The girl Edward had mounted lay on the ground. "No," Lisbeth cried out, fighting to look away, but her eyes were locked into the girl's. Suddenly the girl transformed into Mattie, then baby Jordan. Horrified, Lisbeth flailed against the ground, struggling against gravity to stand. But her legs would not cooperate. She was forced to stay in this position. A crowd watched, cheering her on. Mother, Father, Edward, Mary yelled indecipherable words of encouragement. Lisbeth struggled to hear what they were telling her. Then she looked down at the Mattie/Jordan person under her. Mattie/Jordan shook her head and said, "You had such a good heart."*

Suddenly Lisbeth was in front of a group of dark-skinned women lined up against a bright white wall. Walking up and down across the row, she examined each one. Edward shadowed behind her so closely that she felt his warm breath again her neck.

"You choose," he whispered seductively into her ear.

It was hard for Lisbeth. She wanted to please Edward by making the right choice, but she did not know any of these slaves. Suddenly Lisbeth recognized Jordan, no longer a baby, but clearly the girl Lisbeth had carried on her hip so long ago.

"Her," she pointed.

"Good choice," Edward confirmed.

He took Jordan by the hand. She can walk now, Lisbeth thought to herself in the dream. As Edward led Jordan away, Mattie suddenly appeared and started screaming, "Not my baby. Don't take my baby."

"Mattie, it is all right," Lisbeth soothed Mattie. "We shall take care of her. We would never hurt Jordan. See..." Lisbeth turned her attention to Edward and saw him leading Jordan toward the willow tree.

“No!” Lisbeth screamed because she realized what she had chosen the girl for. “Not Jordan. No, not her. Not there. NO!”

Lisbeth yelled and woke with a start. She sat up, shaking and gasping for air. Alone and scared, she reached under her pillow for the shell necklace. She breathed in deep and rubbed the smooth shell.

“Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God,” Lisbeth panted.

For the first time in two days she allowed herself to focus on the face of the enslaved child, a girl with eyes so similar to Mattie’s that it hurt. Lisbeth felt the child’s fear. She imagined the feelings of the girl’s mother, the pain of knowing such a thing was being done and yet being unable to protect her daughter from it. Lisbeth knew with absolute certainty that if Mattie had stayed, someday it would be Jordan lying on the ground under a white man. Had Mattie known such treatment? It was devastating to think about, but Lisbeth allowed herself to consider life at Fair Oaks from Mattie’s perspective. She knew now that Mattie had left to protect Jordan.

Mother and Father insisted slaves were children who needed guidance to survive. They argued fervently against emancipation as being entirely unfair to the negroes. But how could Mother consider the incident under the willow protection? If she married Edward she would be agreeing such treatment was acceptable.

I cannot do it, she realized. I cannot marry Edward. Adrenaline rushed through her body. She clenched her eyes tight against a dizzying wave. Her hands turned icy as blood rushed away from her limbs. It would be the end of her life as she knew it. She would be giving up all hope of having any social standing along the James River, but Lisbeth could no longer pretend enslaving negroes was for their own protection.

Lying down, gripping her shell, a peace settled over Lisbeth. She felt free. Though she was frightened and confused, in some ways more than before she made her decision, it was done. She was not going to marry Edward. Now she needed to make a plan for her life.

She thought late into the night. She recalled all the women she knew who were not married: Mrs. Gray, Aunt Beatrice, and Miss Taylor, the comportment instructor. She considered following each of their paths. She thought of all the young, and not young, men who were available for marriage. She thought and she weighed, imagining a future for herself with each option. Finally she chose the best, though unlikely, possibility.

Chapter 23

The next day, Lisbeth led Mother to believe she was taking the buggy to visit Mary, though she never stated it outright. Her parents would be dismayed if they knew where she was actually heading.

After driving for nearly an hour, Lisbeth pulled up to a modest but well-built home. Roses and marigolds in full bloom formed a colorful border along the edge of the front yard. Green paint covered the stairs leading up to a large porch with white wicker furniture. Lisbeth slowly climbed the stairs, counting with each step 1..2..3...until she reached seven. She willed herself to breathe along the way. Fearing the rapid pounding of her heart was making her face flush, she paused on the porch to fan herself with a handkerchief.

She opened the screen door to reveal a shiny front door painted to match the stairs. After striking the wood three times, she put her arm at her side to wait through the eternity it took for the door to be opened. A large negress peered out at Lisbeth.

“Yes, mistress, may I help you?”

“I am looking for Mister Matthew. Is he home?”

“Yes. Come sit down while I fetch him.”

Lisbeth was escorted to a small living room with a plain couch, two chairs, and a grand piano. The room was comfortable, not intimidating. Lisbeth was still standing, gazing around the room, when Matthew arrived. His hazel eyes popped open and a small grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“Elizabeth? What a surprise. How lovely to see you,” Matthew called out. Delight shone in his face. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? Do you perhaps need a favor for your wedding? Whatever it is, I will be happy to be of service.”

“Oh, Matthew,” Lisbeth replied. “I truly hope you can help me.”

Lisbeth breathed deeply to prevent tears from seeping out. Matthew, sensing her distress, invited her to sit while he went for lemonade. When he returned, Lisbeth was pacing in front of the couch.

“Please sit,” she implored. “I realize it is unconventional for you to sit while I am standing, but I must walk while I talk. I have come to realize in the past few days that I am not so conventional. I have a question for you. As you can see, I am nervous about it. It is not seemly. I hope you will forgive me. Actually, I have more than one question.”

“Elizabeth, you can ask anything of me. Do not be concerned about being offensive,” Matthew replied as he hovered on the edge of his seat. His own emotions mirrored Lisbeth’s as he shook his leg and tapped on his knee. His eyes followed Lisbeth as she paced in front of him.

Lisbeth wiped her sweating palms on her gown, stopped pacing, swallowed hard, and finally stammered out her first question, stumbling for the correct language, “Have you ever... as a man and woman...with a slave...?”

Full of shame, she looked at the carpet, unable to be more articulate. Biting her lip, hoping he understood, she waited for a reply.

“Are you asking me about relations?” asked Matthew, sounding extremely incredulous.

“Yes!” Lisbeth exhaled. She was relieved that she need not say more. Her cheeks burning with humiliation, she confirmed, “Relations.”

The room pounded with silence. Lisbeth did not look up because she did not want to see the look on Matthew’s face.

Shock in his voice, Matthew replied, “That is your question of me?”

Lisbeth nodded.

“I am surprised,” Matthew agreed. He shook his head. “No, I cannot say I have...had...relations.”

Lisbeth was relieved. Her instinct had been correct.

“My next question may be more shocking,” she told him. “Give me a moment.”

On the drive here she had considered how she would ask him this question. She had rehearsed what she would say. But now, no words seemed appropriate. She took a drink and a few deep breaths. The tension built, but the perfect words did not come to her. Eventually she stammered out, “I...I am not going to marry Edward Cunningham.” Those words were like a dam breaking inside Lisbeth. She looked directly at Matthew and asked in a

rush, "May I come with you to Ohio? As your wife? I need a husband. You are not engaged. You are about the only man around here who is not. Besides, we both enjoy Shakespeare."

Matthew collapsed against the back of his chair. He stared at her, confused. "You cannot possibly be serious?"

The adrenaline rushed out of Lisbeth's body. Suddenly she was unable to hold herself up any longer and sank down into the couch. Trembling on the sofa, she wanted to curl up into a ball and disappear.

Mustering up her last bit of energy, she politely responded, "I hope that you can forgive me for being so forward. I see now that I am being foolish. It was my best idea. But I understand you would not want me for a wife." She stood to leave.

"Goodbye, Matthew," Lisbeth stated. "Thank you for your time. I apologize for placing you in this uncomfortable situation. I would appreciate it if you would keep this conversation in strictest confidence."

"Elizabeth, you misunderstand me," Matthew replied.

He moved next to her on the couch. He reached up and lightly rested his fingers against her arm. She sank back down to the cushion. She was acutely aware that her shaking knee was only inches away from Matthew's.

He looked intently at Lisbeth and went on. "I did not mean to say that I do not want you as my wife. What I cannot understand is why you want me for a husband?"

Desperate to make her case, Lisbeth blurted out, "To be honest, I want a good man rather more than a good husband. I believe you are such a man. I saw Edward...lying with a slave. I am ashamed to say I did not realize such things went on before, but I found that afterward I could not pretend any longer that slavery is beneficial to the negroes. My parents have always insisted that we are kind to our slaves, that they needed us to give them a good life on earth, and they need us to help them be Christian so they can have salvation for eternity." Anger rose in Lisbeth's voice as she spoke more adamantly. "But it is not Christian to lay with a girl. I cannot pray to God each night married to him. I believe I can if I am married to you."

Lisbeth searched Matthew's face, looking for signs of understanding. Matthew slowly nodded his head.

"I can only hope to prove your faith in me justified," Matthew said. He laughed, and then with a bemused grin on his face he asked, "You are entirely serious? You want to marry me? You understand I am going to

Ohio to farm? I will have no bondsmen, only paid field hands. I will not have a house even as large as this one, only four bedrooms and no parlor.”

“I understand. I am willing to go if you will have me,” Lisbeth replied.

“Are you free to marry? Will your parents approve?”

“Yes, I am free,” Lisbeth replied though she had not yet broken her engagement to Edward, “and no, my parents will not approve. But they cannot force me into a marriage of their choosing. I am willing to marry you without their blessing. I am of age. They can do nothing to prevent it if I have my birth certificate.”

Matthew went down upon one knee and took Lisbeth’s hand in his. He was trembling. Staring into her eyes, he spoke clearly, “Lisbeth Wainwright, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Lisbeth gazed at Matthew’s gentle and hopeful face, his beautiful hazel eyes. A chill traveled down her spine. This was more than she had hoped for. Matthew was such a kind man. She had made the right choice.

Tears of hope and relief glistened in her eyes. “Yes, Matthew, I will.”

Impulsively she leaned in to hug Matthew. But then, suddenly feeling shy, she pulled herself back. Her improper question was bold enough. She did not wish to risk further diminishing Matthew’s respect.

Clearing his throat, Matthew returned to the couch. “When shall we do this? Would you care for a wedding?”

“I would like to get married as soon as possible, if you are willing, by a justice of the peace.”

“Whatever you would prefer is fine with me.”

Having given this thought in the midst of the night, Lisbeth suggested a plan. “I prefer that we go to Charles City on Monday. Afterward, when it is too late, I will inform my parents.”

Of course, she would inform Edward as well, but she would not speak of that with Matthew. They agreed to carry on with their lives as they had been until Monday morning. Matthew walked Lisbeth to her buggy and carefully assisted her into it. She felt his eyes upon her as she drove away. Lisbeth reveled in her good fortune. She had found a way to salvage her life.



Detached from all that was going on around her, Lisbeth suffered in silence through dinner that evening. As always the conversation was filled with

speculation about the ongoing disagreements with the northern states and the arrogance of abolitionists. There were long-winded arguments in favor and against secession from the Union. Lisbeth paid little attention to the talk. Soon she would be living in a free state and would not have to be concerned with the politics or morality of slavery. She was leaving all this behind.

Misinterpreting Lisbeth's quiet mood, Mother noted, "I am so glad to see you have fully recovered, Elizabeth. You are remarkably at ease this evening. It bodes well for your ability to take your place at White Pines."



After her nightly prayers, Lisbeth did not climb into bed. Instead she sat in a chair reading by a dim oil lamp. She refused Emily's offer to fetch warm milk. She waited, struggling to stay awake until well into the night when she could be certain the entire household was deeply asleep. At two o'clock in the morning she left the sanctuary of her room.

Carrying the oil lamp, she carefully crept along the hallway, down the front staircase, and into Father's study. She crossed to his desk and started pulling open drawers. She was seeking her birth certificate. She had no idea where it might be. The top drawers held ink, pens, a knife, and other odds and ends. The bottom drawers held ledgers and papers. There were records from crop sales going years back, but no birth certificates.

She turned around to search the bookcase behind the desk. The top shelves were covered with leather-bound books. A wrought iron chest sat on the bottom of the case. She opened it and found stacks of papers. She brought the documents to Father's desk and stood sorting through them. She carefully kept them in order. Part-way through the stack she found a meticulous family tree going back for decades.

She examined this record, looking for her own name. There she was, *Elizabeth Ann Wainwright, April 14, 1837 live birth*. Two neat lines connected her name to her parents. Next to her name was a record of Jack's birth, followed by three more entries: *Baby Boy Wainwright August 20, 1840 stillborn*, *Baby Boy Wainwright September 30, 1841 still born*, and *Baby Girl Wainwright, April 27, 1842, still born*. Lisbeth was shocked. She had no memory of her mother being pregnant and had never heard that her parents had lost so many children.

To the left of her name was another entry: *Emily*. A line interrupted by a thick question mark ran from Emily's name to Father's. "Dear God!" Lisbeth gasped. Another line ran from Emily's name to Uncle Alistair's name. It too was interrupted by a dark question mark. Emily was her half-sister or her cousin. There was the proof that in some way she was related to Emily. This news further confirmed her choice to leave.

She renewed her search through the papers with vigor until she found her own birth certificate. Lisbeth returned everything else to its place and snuck upstairs undetected. She hid her birth certificate in the back of her wardrobe and then slept soundly.

Chapter 24

Monday morning, Lisbeth lay in bed anticipating the events of the day. She imagined standing before the justice with Matthew at her side. She tried but could not picture his face. Panic started to rise, but she pressed it back down. *This is the correct path!* she insisted to herself.

Lisbeth did not want to raise her parents' suspicions, but she wanted to look nice on her wedding day. While Emily waited, Lisbeth spent considerable time sorting through her gowns. In addition to wanting an attractive dress, she needed one that she could remove herself. She had no way of knowing if someone would be available to help her dress. Eventually she chose a Swiss dot with a light blue background and bright blue dots that buttoned down the front. It was not particularly tight in the bodice, so she could wear a corset that laced on the side. Emily looked surprised but did not comment when Lisbeth took the same care in choosing a hairstyle. She tried a tight bun, then an upsweep, before finally settling on a loose chignon. To finish the outfit, Lisbeth wanted to wear the shell necklace. Her trembling hands made it difficult to tie. Noticing Lisbeth's struggles, Emily wordlessly completed the task. Lisbeth tucked the shell beneath her gown before rising from the vanity.

Lisbeth told Mother she was calling on Mary, but instead she guided her horse to Matthew's home. He was waiting on the porch and nodded a greeting as soon as she saw him. A bemused smile crossed his face as he assisted her from the buggy.

"I am glad to see you," Matthew said. "You look lovely."

"Thank you," Lisbeth replied, looking down.

"Are you certain you want to do this?" he asked, lowering his head so that he could see her face.

Lisbeth raised her head, nodded once, and confirmed, "Certainly."

They drove to Charles City in Matthew's carriage. Lisbeth longed for something interesting to say. In the past, it had been so easy to speak with Matthew, but today she could think of nothing appropriate. Harking back to Miss Taylor's lessons, she brought up the weather.

"We are fortunate the weather is so mild today," Lisbeth said.

"Yes," agreed Matthew, "it is mild."

Reaching to keep the conversation going, Lisbeth asked, "Is the weather similar in Ohio?"

"I understand the summers may be warmer and the winters cooler."

Lisbeth nodded, but could not think of anything more to keep the conversation going.

"I had been planning to move in early May so I can oversee the planting. Is that suitable to you?"

"Yes, Matthew. Anytime will be fine."

"You will have to decide how you want to set up your kitchen," Matthew said. "It can be however you wish."

"Oh, dear. I am afraid I have no experience in a kitchen. I cannot cook at all," Lisbeth voiced with anxiety. "But," she conceded, "I imagine I can learn, if necessary."

"I did not mean to concern you," Matthew rushed to say. "We can have a cook, of course. I only meant that you can plan it however you like."

"Well, thank you, Matthew," Lisbeth said, relieved. "Yes, I think a cook would be wise."

As they traveled the road toward the life-changing ceremony, they cautiously made plans for their future together. In Charles City everything happened very quickly. Lisbeth had been afraid that the justice would refuse them a marriage license, but there was no problem once she showed her birth certificate proving she was of age. The ceremony was simple and over in less than ten minutes. Pausing before his buggy after it was all over, Matthew leaned in to kiss Lisbeth. She turned her head to give him her cheek, but then realized, too late, she should offer her lips to her husband. She turned her head once again, and his lips landed at the edge of her mouth.

"Excuse me," he stuttered.

Lisbeth blushed. Embarrassed, they did not speak during the long, awkward ride back.



Alone again, Lisbeth drove away from Matthew's home, though she supposed it was her temporary home now too. Matthew offered to accompany her, but she wished to face Edward and then her parents by herself. She had been practicing her speech for two days. She had asked Matthew to come for her at Fair Oaks at suppertime. He would either join the family for supper or she would leave with her husband before they ate. That would be up to her parents.

At White Pines, Lisbeth breathed deeply to settle her nerves. She left the buggy with the livery boy, a large, middle-aged man. Though he had always been waiting in front of White Pines the many times she had visited, she looked at him and wondered about his life for the first time.

"Thank you, Francis," Lisbeth said, hoping she remembered his name correctly. "Good afternoon."

Surprise registered on his face. "Good day to you, miss. It is an especially lovely day."

"Yes, it is," she confirmed. "An especially lovely day. I shall not be long, so you need not unhitch Shadow from the buggy."

"Yes, miss. Thank you, miss."

Ma'am, Lisbeth thought to herself. *I am now a ma'am*. But she did not correct him.

Lisbeth was shown into the elegant parlor. She stood by the davenport waiting for Edward. He looked relieved when he saw her.

"Elizabeth, I am so delighted at this unexpected visit. You look wonderful. I see you are fully recovered from your 'flu'," Edward fawned, with only a slight hint of irony in his voice.

Lisbeth did not reply or move toward him.

Crossing to her, Edward asked, "Did you receive the necklace I sent? Mother assisted me in selecting it. She wanted it to be simple and to your taste."

Edward glanced at Lisbeth's neck, "Oh, you are not wearing it. You have that old thing on. You must be feeling sentimental today. Shall I call Mother and Emma to join us for a morning tea?"

Edward reached for her, prepared to kiss Lisbeth's cheeks. Twisting away from him, she sat down upon the divan. He sat close, reaching for her hand.

Clasping her hands tightly together, she moved away from him and looked him in the eye.

“Edward, I have come to speak with you and you alone. This is not easy for me.” She paused and then went on, “But...I came to inform you that I am not going to marry you. I have prayed for guidance every day since the incident, and I know now I cannot possibly be your wife.”

“Elizabeth, have you gone mad?!” Edward exclaimed, indignation filling his voice. “If this is about the episode under the willow, I can assure you it will not happen again. Once we are married, you will be the only woman with whom I shall lay. Surely I can hold off until our wedding night. You need not worry about it again.” He reached over and gently stroked the back of her left hand with one finger. Disgusted, she pulled her hand away.

“Edward, I have come to realize that this is not about you and me. It is about the little girl who was lying on the ground beneath you. At night when I close my eyes, it is her face I see, in pain, hoping for release. It is wrong for her to be in such a position. I suppose, if I am being honest with you and with myself, I have become an abolitionist.” She paused for a breath and then went on, “On my birthday, I realized...it is wrong to own another person. I will not be a part of it anymore. I am moving to a free state, to Ohio.”

“Now I know you are mad!” Edward screeched with contempt. “You have nothing! You are not a woman of independent means. Your parents will have none of this. You are being childish over one small matter. Do you expect me to beg? To grovel? What are you hoping to accomplish by making such a threat? This is no way to begin a marriage! I am to be your husband. I will not grovel before my future wife. That is enough. I do not want to hear any more about it. It is over.”

“It is over,” Lisbeth agreed, intentionally keeping her voice calm, “because I have made a decision. This is not a threat, Edward. I will not be marrying you.”

“How can you ruin both of our lives?” Edward yelled.

“I am not ruining my life. I am saving it. As for you, I have grown fond of you this past year...”

“FOND?” Edward snorted in disbelief. “That is little consolation to me. You are being outrageous.”

“Please say goodbye to your mother and sister for me,” she said with a composure that belied the frantic beating of her heart. She rose and handed

him a red velvet pouch filled with the gifts he had given her.

She quickly crossed to the door to escape. Several house servants were standing in the foyer. They watched as Edward followed close behind Lisbeth, his hot breath on her neck, screaming, "When you change your mind, do not bother to return to me! You are ruined!"

She reached for the door knob and gave it a firm turn. Her moist hand slipped. Cowering away from Edward, she wiped her hand and then turned the knob successfully.

Once she was out of the house, crossing the front porch, she heard the door slam hard followed by the sound of breaking glass. A sharp shard bounced off the porch floor and struck her ankle, cutting a thin line on her skin. She cried out but did not turn around. She did not want to see the scene behind her.

Grateful that the buggy was still in front of the house, she rushed down the stairs toward it. After she climbed into the safety of her transportation, she look over at the porch. The door flew open. Edward stormed out in a rage, his eyes burning and his face red. He reached back his arm and hurled something directly at Lisbeth. A necklace flew through the air. Lisbeth ducked and it sailed past her. She urged her horse forward. Edward continued to hurl his gifts at her, hatred in his eyes, yelling with each movement of his arm: "You...will...never... be...accepted...again!"

One of the missiles, a sapphire ear bob, landed in the buggy next to Lisbeth's foot. She stopped the horse, tossed the jewel onto the ground, and turned for one last look. Edward sat bent over on the top stair, his head buried in his hands, fingers entwined in his dark brown hair, his body shaking. In the foreground, Francis was bent over, slowly gathering the scattered jewels.

"I made the correct choice, I made the correct choice, I made the correct choice," she panted to herself, water streaming down her cheeks as she continued on her path.



Rehearsing along the way, Lisbeth prepared for the ordeal that was to come. She did not expect her parents to understand her choice, but she hoped they would let her go without a scene.

“Lisbeth, whatever is the matter? You look as if you have seen a ghost,” Father commented when Lisbeth came into the drawing room.

“You must be tired from your excursion, dear,” asserted Mother lightly. “Have a rest before supper. We shall eat in one hour.”

“Mother, Father, I have something to tell you. It cannot wait.”

Lisbeth studied her parents, then looked around the room. She might never be allowed in it again. She noticed the final napkin for her trousseau peeking out from her basket, the texture of the velvet curtains, the mingled scent of smoke and perfume. Memories flooded in: listening to poetry while stitching by the fireplace, singing at the piano, Father arguing with the newspaper, Grandmother Wainwright picking out her sewing, memorizing scripture. She took in every corner before returning her gaze to her parents. She wanted her bearing to convey strength and confidence, but her glassy eyes betrayed her.

“Elizabeth, you are frightening me,” Mother said forcefully, but there was no disguising the anxiety in her voice. “Stop being dramatic and tell us what you have to say.”

“Go on, Elizabeth,” Father prodded gently.

“I am not marrying Edward,” Lisbeth blurted out.

“Oh, that nonsense again,” said Mother, clearly relieved. “You are only having pre-marriage concerns. Every young woman has them. You had me overwrought. Go have a rest. You will feel better when you are not so tired.”

“No, Mother. Truly, I am not marrying Edward,” Lisbeth insisted. “In fact, I cannot...I am already married...to someone else.”

Father leapt up, outrage and confusion shooting from his eyes. “What do you mean ‘already married’? Elizabeth, this is not a joking matter!”

“Mother, Father, I am sorry, but I will not marry Edward and be the mistress of White Pines,” she choked out through a tight throat. “I married Matthew Johnson earlier today. We will be moving to Ohio. I do not expect you to understand, but I hope you will accept him.”

“Matthew Johnson!” screeched Mother, her face scarlet. “You expect Matthew Johnson to be the father of my grandchildren, in Ohio? Absolutely not, we forbid it.”

“It is too late, Mother. We were married this afternoon in Charles City.”

“We will have it annulled,” declared Father.

“I do not want my marriage to be annulled.” Lisbeth stood firm. “I am Matthew Johnson’s wife.”

Father stormed around the room. He paced at the edge of the room, moving between the globe and the piano. Unable to contain himself, he turned to Lisbeth and glared with undisguised fury burning in his eyes. He hissed at Lisbeth, “I do not think you understand the implications of your decision. Your reputation will be ruined. My reputation will be ruined. You have disgraced yourself, this family, and all of Fair Oaks. I absolutely forbid you to do this.”

“It is done,” Lisbeth said, shaking all over. “I am an adult. You cannot stop me. I am leaving with Matthew. The only decision you have to make is whether we leave before supper or after. I am going to pack. Please inform me if you wish me to leave behind any of my personal belongings.”

Giving her parents a wide berth, she walked to the sewing basket, removed the nearly finished napkin, and slipped out the door. Behind her, Mother’s sobs echoed in time with Father’s pounding on the top of the piano.

Lisbeth shook as she ascended to the second floor. In her bedroom, she collapsed into her familiar rocking chair and bent over sobbing. Her body heaved uncontrollably as all the emotion of the day came pouring out in this safe, familiar place. Then she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Here you go, miss,” Emily said, handing Lisbeth a glass of water.

Lisbeth tried to take the water, but her hands were shaking too hard.

“I just gonna leave it here. You let me know if you need anything else. Sorry you so sad.”

Lisbeth took in a gasping breath to calm herself. After three tries, she was able to stammer out a weak “thank you” to Emily. Emily stood quietly next to Lisbeth, patting her back, murmuring soothing words. Finally, when no more tears came, Lisbeth took a sip of the cool water, wiped her damp face, and told Emily she needed to pack her belongings.

“So soon, miss? The wedding not for two weeks.”

“Actually, though it is hard to believe, I am a married woman already. I ended my engagement with Edward Cunningham. I am now Mrs. Matthew Johnson. We were married this morning. I will be leaving with him this evening. Can you please fetch my trunk?”

“Yes,” Emily replied, then went to fetch Lisbeth’s luggage. At the door she turned back and quietly said, “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Emily. Thank you very much.”

“Do I ready myself to leave tonight as well, miss? I mean, madam.”

“No, Emily. My parents will no longer be giving you to me as a wedding gift.”



While Lisbeth and Emily were sorting through items to pack and items to leave behind, Mother came into the room. Her eyes were puffy and red. She looked concerned and exhausted. She sat carefully in the chair by the fireplace.

“I will not change my mind, Mother,” Lisbeth preempted.

“You are clearly upset by your decision. Your father and I are as well. I want to understand what you are thinking. Edward’s actions were harmful to you. I can see that, but is it worth throwing your life away over his garish behavior? I do not believe you understand what you are giving up. You will be the wife of a farmer, very far from home. You have the opportunity to stay so very nearby, to have holidays with us. To have the better things in life, to maintain your friendships. Do you truly want to give all that up? You are naïve and romantic if you believe Matthew Johnson will be devoted to only you. Yes, Edward hurt you, but you are hurting yourself even more.”

“I will tell you what I told him, though I do not expect you to understand either,” Lisbeth asserted. “I did not cancel the wedding because Edward hurt me. I ended my engagement because of the girl he hurt.”

“Whatever are you talking about?” Mother exclaimed.

“That is exactly the problem, Mother! You do not even see the trauma he caused the girl he mounted. I, on the other hand, cannot stop seeing it! Every night when I close my eyes, she is floating in my mind, desperation in her eyes. What did she ever do to deserve such treatment? She was hurt, far worse than I will ever be. And you try to convince me, and yourself, that she would be flattered by such an experience!” Lisbeth said with contempt. “Well, I do not believe you, Mother! She was not flattered. She was in pain. That is why I will be moving to Ohio, a free state, where I will not have to be a part of the evil of slavery.”

“You are naïve, Elizabeth,” Mother scoffed. “Slavery will be a part of you wherever you go. It is as much a part of you as your hair color or your

blood. It is a fundamental part of this country. It will not be going away any time soon. Throwing your life away for a nigger. I am ashamed of you.”

Lisbeth had no response. Her mother’s lack of understanding and compassion were predictable. She saw no reason to persevere with the conversation. The women were silent as Lisbeth continued to pack her belongings while Emily, who had heard every word, scurried in the background attempting to be both helpful and invisible.

Eventually Lisbeth broke the silence. “Mother, I would like to take the rocker, if that is acceptable.”

“You may take anything from this room except Emily.” Mother rose with a deep sigh and stared at the pile of belongings gathered on the bed. She walked slowly to the door. From the threshold, tears glistening in her eyes, she spoke softly, “Let me know when you are finished. I will send William to fetch your belongings. You and Mr. Johnson may have tea with us before supper. Neither of you are welcome at my table tonight.”

While she was packing, Lisbeth heard the front door open and close. Curious about the visitor, she went downstairs, but by the time she got to the entryway, it was empty. She heard voices coming from Father’s study and started to walk toward it.

“Elizabeth, move away from that door,” Mother commanded.

“Who is Father speaking with?” Lisbeth asked.

“The sheriff is here to uphold our rights.”

Lisbeth panicked. “What about my rights, Mother? I am an adult. You cannot force me to marry Edward!”

The door to the study opened. Father walked out and said, “The sheriff has some questions for you, Elizabeth.”

“I have my birth certificate that shows I am of age,” Lisbeth told the sheriff.

Father looked surprised.

“Well, go get it,” the sheriff directed.

Lisbeth rushed upstairs and returned with the document from her room.

The sheriff looked it over. “This her birth certificate?” he asked Father.

Father nodded with a scowl.

“There is nothing I can do for you, sir.”

Mother insisted, “Matthew Johnson took advantage of Elizabeth. She was pressured into this mistake.”

“Is that true?” the sheriff asked.

“No,” Lisbeth replied. “Matthew did not force me to marry him. I did so of my own free will.”

“I am sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright, there is nothing the law can do for you. The judges are clear on this matter,” the sheriff said, ending his inquiry.

Relieved, Lisbeth slipped away from her parents without a word and went back to her room to finish gathering her belongings.

Tea in the drawing room was tense but civil. Jack, being intentionally provocative, inquired about Matthew’s views on abolition.

“I have come to the firm conviction that the phrase ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,’ includes men of all races.”

Stunned, Father countered, “Certainly Jefferson meant only the dominant races shall have such freedoms.”

“I believe we must include men of the lesser races as well,” Matthew replied.

“Whatever you believe, it is only a matter of time before we enter into war over it,” inserted Jack. “I will fight with Virginia, whichever side it chooses.”

“That is enough! I do not want any further discussion on this topic,” declared Mother, not bothering to hide her anger. “Tell me about the frontier where you will be taking my only daughter.”

“Oberlin, ma’am,” Matthew explained.

“The town with the college that admits niggers?” glared Father.

“Yes, that is the place, sir,” Matthew replied, then turned the conversation. “It is said to be quite lovely with good soil. I...uh, we, have 120 acres to plant.”

“You plan to farm it yourself?” inquired Mother.

“With the assistance of paid farm hands. Ohio has plenty of laborers.”

“Where will you live?”

“I have rented a house in town. We shall live there while our home is being built.” He turned to Lisbeth and smiled. “We have many decisions to make.”

Lost in her own thoughts, she did not see that he was looking at her, awaiting a response. By the time she smiled back, he had looked away

already. *Decisions to make*, she thought to herself. She was too tired to make any more decisions.



Driving away, Lisbeth was a jumble of emotions. She was grateful to be away from the tension, yet sad to be leaving her family and the only home she had ever known. She could hardly comprehend the enormous shift her life had already taken. And yet there would still be more. She did not want to focus on it, but she grew more and more nervous as they drove closer to her new home, where she would lay with Matthew for the first time.

Matthew broke into Lisbeth's thoughts. "If you prefer, we do not have to share a room tonight."

Though the offer was tempting, Lisbeth rejected it. She was determined to be a good wife. It was the least she could do for the man who had given her a way out. She said, "No, Matthew. I am your wife. I shall sleep in your room."

They drove on in silence for the rest of the long ride.



Matthew's parents greeted them warmly at the door.

"Welcome to the family," Matthew's father said as his wife gave Lisbeth a shy hug.

"Thank you, Mr. Johnson," Lisbeth replied.

"You must call us Mother and Father Johnson now. We are your family."

"Yes, ma'am." Lisbeth agreed. "That would be nice...Mother Johnson."

"It is late. You have had a long day. We will see you in the morning," her new father-in-law said.

The two couples went upstairs. As they prepared for bed, Lisbeth made a request. "May I please get changed and under the covers in privacy? A man has never seen me in my night clothes."

"Certainly," replied Matthew. "Do you wish to have Mother or Fanny help you undress?"

"No. Thank you. I can manage on my own. Shall I hang my things in this wardrobe?"

"Yes. I removed my things from it. It is for your use alone," Matthew informed her and left the room.

Lisbeth took a deep breath. *You can do this*, she told herself. Though she had planned for items she could remove herself, it was extremely difficult to unlace her corset with nervous hands. After slipping on her nightgown, she hung the gown in the oak wardrobe. She unbound her hair, carefully brushed it, and then climbed under the blue and brown log cabin quilt to await Matthew.

After an eternity of waiting—she supposed he wanted to give her adequate time to undress—he returned. She stared at his face, wanting to avoid looking at his night clothes, but her eyes flickered across his body against her will. In a flash she saw a bit of dark hair on his pale leg below the white cotton sleeping gown. As he climbed into bed Matthew's foot touched hers. She flinched. Though her heart was racing, she lay still on her back, arms at her sides, looking up at the wooden ceiling.

"We do not have to—" Matthew started to say.

"Yes, we do," Lisbeth interrupted. She wanted to get this over with, not have it hanging over her head for yet another day.

Matthew leaned over her and gently kissed her lips. She wanted to kiss him back, but her lips would not move. He abandoned her mouth to softly kiss her across one cheek and then the other before returning to her lips. This time she returned the kiss. Her lips opened as she began to relax, meeting his open mouth.

He made a trail of kisses across her chin, traveling down her neck, and pulled away the neck of her gown to reach the hollow where it met her shoulders. She shuddered with pleasure as he tasted her skin with his tongue. Every bit of her attention was focused on the movements of his mouth across her body.

When he came to an obstacle of fabric, she watched as he fumbled with the buttons of her gown, muttering to himself when he had difficulty. She jumped in sudden pleasure when he touched her again.

Matthew pulled away from her. He exclaimed, "I am sorry."

"No, no, you mistake me. Please, go on," Lisbeth whispered.

One hand was intertwined in her hair, and his other hand traveled across her body starting at her shoulder, moving down to her waist, only to be met by another obstacle of fabric. He pulled the material up and reached his hand under her gown, gaining full access to her smooth, warm hip. He slowly moved down her thigh, coming to the end of his reach at her knee. She opened her leg; his hand moved to the inside of her knee.

His hand froze for a moment before it started its ascent up the inside of her thigh. The tips of his fingers meandered along, up, up, up, ever so slowly, crisscrossing back and forth and from side to side. He froze. She was quivering. Why did he stop? She turned to look at him. He was staring at her intently. Was she doing something wrong? Was she supposed to do something besides lay here? She looked at him with a silent question in her eyes.

He whispered so quietly that she barely heard him, "I do not want to hurt you."

"Oh, Matthew, I am fine. Whatever comes next, I will be all right."

A shiver went down her spine. This truly was wonderful. She did not know it could be so lovely. She turned to him and ran her fingers across his back. She hoped his fingers would continue where they had left off, and soon enough they did.

Quivering with desire, Lisbeth pressed her body against him until he entered her. He cried out in pleasure and surprise. She cried out, in pain and longing.

After a few minutes, Matthew froze then shook all over. She feared that he was hurt. Just as she considered asking him if he was all right, he exhaled deeply and collapsed across her chest. Matthew lay there panting. Then he rolled to the side and hugged her tight. It was finished. She had done it. She lay in his arms pressing her body close to his, astonished by her own yearning. Overwhelmed with a flood of emotions, joy, shock, excitement, and relief, she wept onto Matthew's bare chest.

He held her, patting her back without words, filled with despair and shame. He only wanted to protect her but he had hurt her instead. Lying in bed with precious Lisbeth, he did not know what to do.

For years he had been in love with Lisbeth, ever since their first dance when she was twelve years old. He had only attended the socials for the chance to dance with her or have a short conversation. And now, unbelievably, she was his bride. Since Saturday he had been a bundle of nerves, fluctuating between sheer joy and utter disbelief. More than once he thought she would not come back on Monday. He had agonized about how to make this night special, going so far as to ask his father how to pleasure a woman. And now he had ruined it. While this was the most fortunate night of his life, a dream come true, he feared that for Lisbeth it was a nightmare.

"I am sorry," he whispered into her hair too quietly for her to hear.

Chapter 25

JULY 24, 1858

Dearest Mary,

Thank you ever so much for the news from home. You wrote in such detail, I feel as if I were present at your wedding. My biggest regret about my sudden move to Ohio is that I was not in attendance. I am delighted you and Daniel are having a lovely honeymoon. I am certain New York is wonderful.

I know you do not understand my decision. And I am truly sorry for the shame I have brought on my family. I miss you and regret that we will not be watching our children grow up from any veranda in Virginia. But I am pleased you have forgiven me enough to write. I promise to return each letter faithfully.

As for us, we are well. The house is progressing satisfactorily. You would be astonished at how many decisions must be made every day. We have chosen cherry trim in the entryway, living room, and dining room along with oak flooring. We will not be having a sitting room; apparently it is not in fashion out here, but will have a "sun porch" off the living room. It will have windows on three sides. That is in addition to a standard porch that will wrap the house on the other three sides. We shall only have four bedrooms upstairs, in addition to the servants' quarters off of the kitchen. The fortunate part of a small home is that decorating it will not be a burden.

We are building servants' quarters, though they may not ever be used for that purpose. In Ohio, most help choose to live "away." It is actually wonderfully convenient not to be responsible for servants at all hours of the day. Matthew and I spend quiet evenings in one another's company. We have agreed on most everything when it comes to the house, which is fortunate.

Oberlin is lovely. The weather is sticky right now, but they say that the leaves will turn the most beautiful shades of red, yellow, and orange in the

autumn. I am preparing myself for a cold winter. We hope to be residing in our new home by Christmas. It shall be odd to have the holiday with only the two of us, but we are not in a position yet to entertain.

Well, I am running on, so I shall close. In the strictest of confidence I shall share with you my sincere feeling that I may be able to confirm in my next letter news of an addition to our family in the New Year. Please give my best regards to everyone in Virginia.

Your dear friend,

Lisbeth Johnson

Chapter 26

Lisbeth was gathering eggs from the chicken coop when she felt the first labor pain. Even though it was uncomfortable, she smiled. Her baby was coming, possibly today. But she wanted to be sure this was not false labor before she shared the news with Matthew. So she said nothing and went about her morning, stopping to breathe slowly whenever a strong pain came.

Over dinner, Matthew noticed. "Are you in labor?" he asked.

"I am having some pains, but it is early yet."

"Are you certain?" he asked, looking excited and scared.

"The pains only come about ten times in an hour. Mrs. Williams says they will be more than double that when it is time."

"Shall I fetch her?"

"She asked me to wait until I have twenty pains in an hour."

"You trust her?"

"After eight children, she knows about birth. And she assures me that the negro midwife is better than a doctor if there are any problems." Lisbeth challenged him, "You agreed when we spoke of this before."

Matthew sighed. "Yes, you are right. My mother believes midwives are best for childbirth as well."

"I will be fine, Matthew. I am excited to meet our child. Please do not worry about me."

"I am excited as well," Matthew replied, "but I cannot help my concern."

Lisbeth paced around the house throughout the afternoon, stopping to lean on a wall whenever a labor pain came. By late afternoon the contractions came every three minutes so Matthew asked the cook to fetch Mrs. Williams. The bag of waters broke soon after she arrived.

"Looks like your baby will be here any minute," Mrs. Williams said. "Soon the urge to bear down comes."

But the urge to bear down did not come. Instead Lisbeth threw up until nothing was left in her stomach. Thoroughly spent, she lay down in bed and rested between contractions. Matthew and Mrs. Williams wiped her forehead with a cool cloth and offered her small sips of water. Hours passed as the day turned into night.

“Is this normal?” Matthew whispered to Mrs. Williams while Lisbeth dozed.

“Nothing to be concerned about,” she replied. “First babies take a long time. We just need to keep her comfortable and let her body keep at it.”

Which her body did until well past midnight. But after three in the morning, the contractions started to spread out. By the time they were eight minutes apart Mrs. Williams was concerned.

“Mr. Johnson,” Mrs. Williams said, “I am sorry, but this is not normal. That baby should have been out by now. We need to fetch the midwife right away. I pray that she can get labor going again.”



Mattie, who was known by Georgia in Ohio, awoke at once. After so many years as a midwife, she responded immediately to a knock on the door.

She left the warm bed she shared with her husband Emmanuel, the man she now called Thomas, to make her way to the door. Grabbing a robe from a peg by the door, she was only just presentable when she opened it. A slight, white lady shivered in the night before her.

“We got a difficult birth over at the Acres. They sent me to fetch you.”

“Let me change and get my things. I gonna be ready in a moment. Want to wait inside?”

“I’ll wait in the wagon.”

In less than ten minutes, Mattie was ready to head out the door. She roused Emmanuel half awake to let him know she was going. He wished her an easy birth before he returned to his dreams. Moving to Jordan’s bed, she kissed her sleeping daughter on the forehead. She did not kiss Samuel because he was not in their home. The previous night he had gone out with his friends and had yet to return. Pushing aside her worry for her son, she headed out the door to the waiting wagon.

Mattie had to trust that she would be returned when the birthing was over. On more than one occasion, she had been left to walk home from a

birth. The Acres, on the other side of town, would mean a long trek after a hard labor.

Nearly ten years had passed since Mattie and Jordan joined Emmanuel and Samuel on the outskirts of Oberlin. All vestiges of their former selves were erased, except their memories. Colored folk in the area knew better than to ask too much about the past. White folks too. It was a welcome relief that the whites in this part showed very little interest in the negroes, though they were willing to purchase and sell goods and services across color lines. Mattie was known to be the best midwife in the area. Even white folks used her services if it meant the difference between life and death.

Mattie and Emmanuel were proud of their house, their work, and their children. Their home was comfortable and large now, with two bedrooms added onto the main room. Emmanuel's reputation as a master furniture builder was well deserved. His ladder-back chairs were the finest in the county. After three years of saving, he had purchased a lathe to craft round-spindled as well as square-spindled chairs. Between growing corn, furniture making, and midwifing, Mattie and Emmanuel made a good life.

Their children attended the colored school when they were not needed to work. Jordan was as good a student as Samuel. He knew how to read so well that he was top of his class and tutored the younger children for part of the day. His teacher, a Quaker woman, was encouraging him to apply to Oberlin College when he finished high school, but he was reluctant to take that path. He preferred helping his father in woodworking. Emmanuel was glad to have Samuel follow in his path, but Mattie hoped he would try for Oberlin College. She could hardly believe that, thanks to those lessons under the willow, her son was free and had the opportunity to become a teacher or even a lawyer.

Though Samuel was a constant worry to Mattie, Emmanuel assured her their son would be fine, and going out for all hours of the night came naturally to a young man.



Less than an hour later, time enough for night to have turned to morning, Mattie entered the birthing room. Before asking any questions, she went straight to the bed to study the birthing mother. A shiny layer of sweat

glistened on the pale woman's swollen cheeks; her sunken eyes were closed. The movement of her eyeballs showed through her thin eyelids and her shallow breathing hardly filled her lungs.

Mattie studied this face. A chill crept up her back. Though the young woman's face was barely recognizable after ten years and many hours of hard labor, somehow Mattie knew: this woman was Lisbeth. "Dear Lord," she whispered to herself. It seemed impossible. But Mattie knew she was right. The shell around the young woman's throat erased any doubt in Mattie's mind. Reaching her hand out to brush damp hair away from Lisbeth's face, Mattie steadied herself by taking deep breaths in and out. She was acutely aware that the other eyes in the room were on her. Reeling with this turn of events, she worked to hide the onslaught of feelings from the others in the room.

In contrast, Lisbeth was entirely unaware of the people around her. She was so far gone into this birth she no longer existed entirely in this world.

Mattie knelt by the bed and quietly whispered into Lisbeth's ear, "I here now. Mattie here with you now, strong woman. You gonna be all right." Before rising she touched the shell at the base of Lisbeth's neck and felt its companions under her own dress. Then she said the prayer that started all her midwifing, "Dear Lord, please guide me in gettin' this baby born and savin' this precious woman's life." Then she added something extra for Lisbeth, "Please, God, allow me to take care of her one more time. Amen."

She turned to introduce herself as Georgia Freedman and asked for details of the labor. Once they filled her in she took charge of the situation.

"She needs to get somethin' in her. Mr. Johnson, I want you to get some sugar water with salt brought up. Mrs. Williams, will you help me with examinin' her?"

Mattie's experienced fingers felt around the perimeter of Lisbeth's swollen belly, muttering the names of body parts to herself as she went. Deftly she reached into Lisbeth to gather more information.

Upon Matthew's return with the prescriptive brew, the midwife informed him, "Mr. Johnson, this here baby ain't turned proper to come out."

"Please, you must do something," Matthew pleaded. "Just take the baby out. Anything to save her."

"Can't just take a baby out. I gonna have to reach in and turn it right, then see if she can get this baby out herself. You and Mrs. Williams have got to

help me with the turning. If you too scared, go get someone else, but I need two folks to hold her up.”

“No. No need to get someone else. I can help you.” Seeking Mattie’s assurance, Matthew asked, “She is not going to die, is she?”

“Not if I can help it, God willin’. No promises; I ain’t gonna make you a promise that I don’ get to keep, but I done this a few times,” Mattie said, concealing the urgency of the situation from the panicked father-to-be. “We gonna move her so she lyin’ with her legs down over the side of the bed. You two stand by while I reach in. When I say, you pull her standin’ up.”

The midwife crossed to the head of the bed. Leaning in close to Lisbeth’s unconscious form, Mattie whispered, “I gonna have to reach in you to turn this baby. It gonna hurt, a lot. But it gonna save you both.”

They each got into position. Lisbeth was lying down on the bed with her legs dangling over the side. Matthew and Mrs. Williams each held one of her arms while Mattie knelt between her legs. Mattie reached deep inside Lisbeth’s body, stretching open her cervix, to find the baby’s shoulder. Lisbeth screamed, her face contorting in pain. Pushing on the baby’s shoulder, Mattie turned the child, rotating her hand to bring the infant’s head above Lisbeth’s pelvis. When Mattie yelled “now,” her assistants pulled Lisbeth into a standing position, getting gravity’s aid in engaging the infant’s head in the proper spot. Mattie withdrew her hand from the cavity between Lisbeth’s legs.

“We did it,” she declared. “Lay her down gently.”

Matthew breathed a sight of relief and grinned at Mrs. Williams as they lowered Lisbeth to the bed. Mattie reached inside Lisbeth to check the infant’s position again.

“Damn!” Mattie spoke out under her breath. “The baby turned back. We have to do it again. This time we ain’t gonna lay her down when we done. She gonna have to squat. Go get a milkin’ stool, quick,” she commanded Matthew.

On his return, they got into position to do the procedure again. Mattie’s reach into Lisbeth was met with a grunt of pain. The baby was turned into a head down position. Mattie kept her hand in place as Matthew and Mrs. Williams lifted Lisbeth into a standing position. Then they lowered her onto on the milking stool. Surrounded by bedding and pillows, Lisbeth squatted on the stool and rested her back against the bed with her legs bent up.

“That better,” declared Mattie as she examined Lisbeth. “It staying in the right place.”

“Now what happens?” inquired Matthew.

“Mostly we wait and hope she start laborin’ soon. You give her the sugar water in tiny bits. Mrs. Williams, will you brew up some tea with this black cohosh? I expect it gonna get the labor pains comin’ again.”

Matthew looked at Lisbeth’s pale, clammy face. Panic shone in his eyes. He paced around the small room.

“Mr. Johnson, you gonna be feeding that to your wife or do I need to do it? I know you scared. But if you want to help her, you got to make sure her body has what it need to push this baby out once the pains get going again.”

Matthew gave a single nod and sat down next to Lisbeth. Taking the warm liquid in hand, he carefully brought a spoonful of it to her parted lips. He poured it in slowly, but not slowly enough: most of it dribbled right back out.

“Tell her what you doin’. She not so far gone she don’ know you. Talk to her.”

“Lisbeth, it is me, Matthew...your husband. We are trying to help you get this baby out. You have to drink this to make you strong. You need to be strong to get this baby out. Please be strong. I do not want to lose you.” Matthew went on, “I have loved you ever since I first danced with you when you were twelve. You were so amusing and talkative, not like the other girls, and so beautiful too. I wanted that dance to last forever. I never dared hope you would become my wife someday. This year has been so wonderful. I have begun to believe you might be truly happy with me.” Then Matthew begged, “Oh, Lisbeth. Drink this, please.”

He brought the half-filled spoon to her lips again. The warm liquid he poured into her mouth made it down her throat. Spoonful after spoonful he fed her, alternating the sugar water with the black cohosh tincture, until, at last, signs of labor returned.

“She is still unconscious. How will she ever manage to get the infant from her body?” inquired Mrs. Williams.

“I seen it done before—animal nature takes over. But we gonna have to work hard to help her get this baby born.”

The contractions started slowly, but quickly built in intensity. Lisbeth moaned in pain with each one but never opened her eyes. Her mind was in a different world while her body worked in this one. Matthew sat close,

whispering encouragement in her ear, giving her spoonfuls of liquid between the pains. Hours passed before Mattie saw the top of the head between Lisbeth's legs.

"This baby ready to come on out. You two gonna have to help with the squeezin' out. When the pains come big you pull up her legs. I gonna push around the head, see if we can get it out without her rousin'."

A large contraction grasped Lisbeth's body, the assistants pulled Lisbeth's bent legs toward her chest, and Mattie stretched Lisbeth's perineum as the baby's head crowned.

"It comin'. It comin'. Keep goin', keep goin'. Here it come, here it come," Mattie cheered along the incremental movement of the infant until the contraction ended. "It over. Rest her legs now till the next one come."

The next contraction came, and the next, and the next, but still the baby did not emerge. With each one, the baby's head would come down, but then retreat up the canal when it ended.

"She gonna have to help. This baby need pushin'."

Mattie left her position to come close to Lisbeth's head. She bent to Lisbeth's ear and spoke quietly, firmly, "Lisbeth, listen to me. You gotta help here. Your baby ready to come out. You gotta push. I know you so tired, but you can do this. Jus' two big pushes and you gonna see your baby. Find your strength, Lisbeth. You got it in you." Mattie rubbed Lisbeth's clammy forehead and stroked her damp hair. Though Lisbeth never once opened her eyes, Mattie hoped the words penetrated through her fog. "You got it in you, girl. I know you do."

When the next contraction came, Mattie commanded from the catching position, "Push, Lisbeth, push! Right here where my hand is. Push!"

Lisbeth stirred, made a feeble effort to push, then quickly collapsed back.

"That a good girl, that a girl. Do it jus' like that," Mattie shouted words of encouragement. "With the next one, you two push her head forward while you pull up on her legs. Talk her through this, Mr. Johnson. Encourage her."

Along with the next contraction came quiet words from Matthew, "Push, Lisbeth, push."

Lisbeth's eyes blinked open. She looked directly into Matthew's scared eyes. He leaned in, so close there was nothing else in her world. "You can do it, Lisbeth. We will do this together. Here comes another one. Push, please, push," he begged.

Lisbeth weakly squeezed Matthew's hand, gazed at him with glassy eyes, curled up her body, and pushed with the next contraction. Harder, harder, harder, steady, steady, steady, pushing, pushing, pushing until, at last, Mattie cried out, "You did it! The head out. You did it, baby, you did it!"

Lisbeth collapsed onto the bed entirely spent, but a small smile passed across her lips before she lost consciousness again.

Matthew whispered, "Lisbeth, you have done it." He covered her face with kisses, and his tears left trails of moisture on her cheeks. He kissed the top of her head. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

With the next contraction Mattie pulled the baby out. "A boy!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Johnson, you got a son."

Matthew's gaze broke from Lisbeth's face to look at his child in Mattie's hands. Tears of joy and relief streamed down Matthew's cheeks. It was all right. Everything was all right.

"Thank you. Thank you so much. You saved them. You saved them both!"



Later, when the afterbirth was out, the infant was clean and wrapped, and Lisbeth was sleeping soundly in her bed, Mattie asked, "Mister Johnson, do you have a name for him?"

"Samuel, after my grandfather," Matthew replied.

Mattie's breath caught. "A lovely name. I knowed a baby Samuel once."

"Do you have any children?"

She nodded. "Yes, James, he just twenty-two and eleven-year-old Jennie."

"They must be a great joy to you."

"It sure is somethin' how much you love your children. It took me by surprise with the first one. Thought I knew what I was getting' into for the next, but I gave my heart to each one I brung to my breast."

"I know I have said thank you many times already, but truly, I am so grateful to you for what you have done here today. I cannot possibly thank you enough. You are an angel, sent from heaven to save my wife."

"You done a mighty fine job yourself at her laborin'. Most men woulda run the other way," she said.

Matthew shrugged shyly. "I have been at many births with livestock. When I was scared I reminded myself it was not so different."

"She one lucky girl to have a man like you. You a good man."

"Thank you," he replied and smiled at her. "Thank you for everything."



A few days later, Lisbeth, still in bed recovering from her ordeal, was beaming at the sleeping child nestled in her arms.

"He is so wonderful, Matthew," Lisbeth declared. "He is a gift from heaven."

Lisbeth studied Samuel. She took in the curve of his ear, the pink of his tiny fingernails, his nearly translucent eyelashes. "Do you suppose he is growing enough?" she wondered. "He still looks so small."

"He is only three days out of your womb. Give him time to adjust. However," Matthew suggested, "if you are terribly concerned, we can hire a wet nurse. I suppose your body is spent after your ordeal."

"Absolutely not!" Lisbeth snapped back, upset. "No wet nurse for Samuel. If I cannot provide him with what he needs we shall use cow's milk."

Matthew came close. Stroking Lisbeth's arm, he spoke tenderly and cautiously, "I apologize. I meant no offense. My only consideration is that you might be tired after such a difficult labor. Cow's milk, of course, though I do not think we have anything to be concerned about." After a long pause he went on, "I thought you remember your wet nurse fondly."

"I loved her dearly, more than my own mother. I cannot bear the thought of Samuel having his own wet nurse—I will not have him loving another woman more than he loves me. I cared for Mattie so much, she is who I always wanted when I was frightened. In fact, I dreamed of her the very night of Samuel's birth."

"The midwife must have reminded you of her. She was gentle with you."

"I would very much like to meet her, to thank her in person. Have you sent the payment yet?" asked Lisbeth.

"No," responded Matthew. "Mrs. Williams indicated that two chickens was sufficient payment for a standard birth."

"Then we shall give her four because this was anything but standard. I am certain she saved my life as well as Samuel's." Lisbeth went on,

“Matthew, I will bring the payment to her myself, as soon as I am recovered.”

“Lisbeth, are you certain that is prudent?” Matthew expressed his concern.

“Matthew, I am perfectly capable of driving chickens across town. It is the only proper way for me to meet this negro midwife in person to express my gratitude. If you wish, we can go together.”

Chapter 27

Weeks later, Lisbeth was sufficiently recovered to travel. Perched atop the wagon, she sat next to Matthew as he steered a pair of deep black horses through the fresh spring morning. The warm sun shone down upon them and a gentle breeze swept across their faces. Clucking sounds from three hens and a rooster, payment for the midwife, accompanied their journey past their neighbor's fields into town. Samuel, filled with his mother's milk, was wrapped tight in a flannel blanket, asleep in a box at Lisbeth's feet. On his head sat a pink cap, a gift from the former Mary Ford, now Mary Bartley.

Driving on the dusty roads past eager fields waiting to be planted, Lisbeth spotted a bright yellow flower in front of a white wooden farmhouse.

"Matthew, look...a crocus! It is the sign that spring is surely here. Next year I wish to have crocus blooming in our yard."

"That would be lovely," Matthew replied, smiling at his wife.

"Though the bulbs are quite expensive..."

"It is a luxury we can afford," he assured her.

"Thank you, Matthew," Lisbeth smiled back. "Can you believe we have lived here for nearly a year?"

"It has passed quickly."

They drove on in silence, past the fallow fields, each following the trail of their own thoughts.

"Lisbeth," Matthew broke the silence, "are you very sorry to be in Ohio?"

Lisbeth was surprised to be asked such a forthright question. She shook her head and replied, "Not at all. You need not wonder for a moment, Matthew. I do not regret my decision in the slightest. Quite the contrary, I thank God each night for you and for Samuel. I love our home, Matthew."

Lisbeth slid across the wooden bench until she sat right next to him. She looped her arm through his, leaned against him, resting her head against his shoulder, and squeezed his arm. Matthew nodded his head in satisfaction.



After a stopover to get supplies—ground flour, sugar, and cloth—and any letters brought west on the train, they set out to the other side of town to the midwife's house. Lisbeth slowly tore open an envelope addressed in her mother's precise hand. Reading silently as they drove along the dirt road, she sat back with a sigh when she finished the letter.

"What does she say?" wondered Matthew.

Lisbeth read out loud to Matthew:

Dear Elizabeth,

Thank you for the news of Samuel. Congratulations to you and your husband. I imagine you are proud to have a son. Thank you for the invitation to visit your home, but I am unable to travel at this time. Perhaps you and the baby can come to Virginia in the summer. Your father sends his best wishes.

Sincerely,

Your Mother

"I cannot say I am surprised," Lisbeth said. "But I held a small hope that Samuel's birth would be enticing enough for her to visit Ohio."

"Perhaps my mother will convince her it is not as wild as she imagines. I am certain your mother will visit us one day."

"I suppose," Lisbeth agreed. She shook her head and went on, "But nevertheless, I shall not let her ruin my happiness."

Past the town, small homes were surrounded by fallow fields waiting to be planted. Lisbeth noticed laundry hung out to dry and chickens milling around yards. Occasionally a dark-skinned person with a wide-rimmed hat broke from labor to stare up at the passing wagon.

Carefully reading Mrs. Williams' directions, Lisbeth directed Matthew, "This is the turn. It is the third parcel on the left. Below the road, in the

gully.”

Driving past the first and second farms, Lisbeth told Matthew to slow as they came to the third farm. The house was set back a hundred feet or so down a driveway.

“Here it is,” Lisbeth said.

Matthew was turning the horses at the top of the driveway when something caught Lisbeth’s eye.

“Matthew, stop!” Lisbeth whispered urgently.

Matthew stopped the wagon and looked over at his wife.

A gasp escaped from Lisbeth, and she went white. “Oh, dear God,” Lisbeth whispered. “It cannot be.”

“Lisbeth, you look as if you have seen a ghost!” Matthew exclaimed. “What is the matter?”

Lisbeth scrutinized the scene before her. Two figures were hanging out laundry. A child with a head of bouncy braids handed pieces of wet clothing to a woman. The woman, her head wrapped in a dark cloth with bits of gray hair showing through, efficiently hung the clothes upon the line.

“Lisbeth, what is the matter?” Matthew pressed again.

Without taking her eyes off the scene, Lisbeth replied, “That looks like Mattie.”

“Who?”

“My nurse, Mattie.”

“In Ohio? That is hard to believe.” Matthew shook his head in disbelief. “When did you see her last?”

“It will be ten years on June fourteenth.”

“Are you certain that is her?” he asked.

“No.”

Lisbeth stared as the twosome went about their chore. The daughter, teasing her mother, snatched away a piece of offered cloth at the last minute. The mother caught the end. A tug-of-war ensued, ending when the mother tickled her daughter to gain possession of the shirt. Laughter echoed up to Lisbeth.

“Her laugh...that is Mattie. I am certain.” Lisbeth was stunned. “The girl must be Jordan. She is so big. So very big. They look good...so happy.”

Lisbeth looked over at Matthew, tears pouring down her face. “I know I am foolish, but I have wondered for so many years...if they were even alive. To finally see them, and see that they are so well.”

Gazing at the pair in the distance, Lisbeth was transfixed. She took in their clothes, their hands, their faces. As hard as it was to believe, Mattie and Jordan were alive and well in front of her, only one hundred feet away.

“Should I leave them in peace?” Lisbeth wondered out loud. “Mattie must have known me at Samuel’s birth. She did not tell you she knew me?”

“No, but it is extremely dangerous for fugitive slaves right now. She does not know if she can trust me.”

“But she can,” Lisbeth said.

“Yes, she can, though she does not know that.”

“Do you believe she wishes to see me?” wondered Lisbeth.

“She was tender toward you at Samuel’s birth. It was very apparent. I believe she cares deeply for you.”

The tears streamed faster down Lisbeth’s face.



Eventually Mattie noticed the white folks hovering in her driveway. Recognizing Lisbeth at once, she rushed to pick up the basket of wet clothes.

“Come on. We goin’ in now,” Mattie commanded.

“But Momma, we got more to hang out,” Jordan insisted.

“See that white lady...?” Mattie gestured with her head.

“Uh huh,” Jordan nodded.

“I got to tell you somethin’ about her.”

Rushing into their cabin, Mattie explained to her daughter, “Member how I told you ’bout the little white girl I used to care for? The one that made your baby quilt? Well, she up there on the road. Look like they came to bring me somethin’ for helpin’ her get her baby out. You got to call her Miss Elizabeth if’n she comes round. They may just drive off. I think she must have known it was me. It was her family we runned from.”

“She gonna tell on us?”

“No,” Mattie replied with certainty. “Help me get ready in case she comes down.”

“No white lady ever come in before,” Jordan said with wonder in her voice.



Finally Lisbeth decided. “Matthew, I will do what I set out to do this morning. Please bring me to Mattie’s home.”

A flick of the reins brought the horses to the house below.

Drying her cheeks, Lisbeth told Matthew, “You wait here with Samuel. I will come get you if I need you.”

Lisbeth cautiously climbed to the ground, mindful of every movement of her shaky legs as she went. Crossing to the door, she was acutely aware of the sounds around her: the clucks of the chickens in the wagon and the crunch of gravel under her shoes. She counted her steps from the wagon to the front door of Mattie’s cabin, 1..2..3...up to twelve.

Standing in the bright sunlight, Lisbeth stopped. Her heart beat furiously in her chest. This was foolishness. What was she thinking? Perhaps Mattie did not care to see her, to have her past dredged up, to risk the danger.

Then Lisbeth heard a voice cut through the wooden door: Mattie’s deep, warm woman voice, the voice that had soothed her when she was little, the voice that sang in her dreams. That was her Mattie inside. She raised her hand and knocked.



Mattie opened the door. She had planned to invite Lisbeth in immediately, but instead she stood in the doorway, taking in the woman before her. Tall and strong, so transformed from the little girl that Mattie loved, and yet, those eyes, they were the same. Mattie’s breath caught, her throat closed tight, and tears rushed to her eyes. Motioning with her hands, beckoning Lisbeth in silently, Mattie closed the door tight before she pulled Lisbeth into her strong, warm arms.

Epilogue

I wish I could tell you that Mattie and I were like family to one another from that day on, but I cannot. As I told you, this is a true story. The only proper way for me to have Mattie in my home is for me to hire her, and I am not willing to order her about, and I do not suppose that she would agree to take directions from me.

The only proper reason for me to visit her home is to provide assistance, charity to a family in need. Which I would provide, without hesitation, if she ever needed me to, but she does not need me. She has Samuel and Jordan, her real children, to care for her.

Every Christmas I bring a package to Mattie's family, a small token that does not begin to repay her for all that she gave to me. I pray that she feels the love and appreciation I pour into every muffin or quilt or jar of jam.

Occasionally we see one another in town. The last time was in the spring when my Samuel was seven. He ran from me, down the side of the general store, as we were going to make a purchase of flour and sugar for a cake. I followed, ready to chastise him, when she came around from the back. Too stunned to speak or move, I froze and stared at Mattie. She stared right back, looking at me like she knew my soul.

Then Samuel shouted, "Look," breaking our attention from one another. "The first crocus of spring!"

Mattie and I gazed in the direction he pointed.

"Why looky at that. Yellow too, how lovely," Mattie responded.

Samuel announced proudly, "Yellow crocuses are my momma's favorites. My momma and I will have a picnic with black-eye peas today to celebrate."

"That right?" Mattie said with a shake of her head. "In my family we do just the same thing. Imagine that."

Our eyes met. I gazed intently at Mattie hoping she understood all that was in my heart. More than anything I wanted to rush to her and be embraced in her loving, familiar arms; to laugh and hug, to introduce Samuel to her, and have him know that this was the very person who taught me to hunt for crocuses. I wanted my Samuel to meet her, to know her, to love her. But I did not rush or introduce or laugh or hug; I simply smiled, a tender, moist-eyed smile across the vast distance between us.

Mattie smiled back at me before we went our separate ways.

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Roots and Shoots Photography

Laila Ibrahim's expertise in multicultural developmental psychology provided ample material for the story of Mattie and Lisbeth. Laila was the founder and director of Woolsey Children's School where she had first hand experiences loving children that were not her own. As a birth doula she is privileged to witness the intensity and joy of childbirth. She works as the Director of Children and Family Ministries at the First Unitarian Church in Oakland. She lives in a co-housing community in Berkeley, California, with her wife, Rinda, their children, Kalin and Maya, and their dogs, Bella and Lucie. *Yellow Crocus* is her first novel.